TO THE READER

KINDLY use this book very carefully. If the book is disfigured or marked or written on while in your possession the book will have to be replaced by a new copy or paid for. In case the book be a volume of set of which single volumes are not available the price of the

Checked

AMARSINGH COLLEGE

Library

Checked
1976

Class No. F823 W2

Book No. W540

Acc. No. 6554 ✓

Corbature

CHECKED
2009-10

QUEEN'S FOLLY

F
W54
6554
11-7-47

First Edition . . . . *September, 1925*

THIN PAPER EDITION

First Issued . . . . *September, 1927*

CONTENTS

CHAP.		PAGE
I	THE COTTAGE	7
II	FARING FORTH	15
III	THE CAPTAIN	24
IV	AT QUEEN'S FOLLY	34
V	A VERY PLEASANT HELP	42
VI	IN TROUBLE	51
VII	GAINING A FOOTING	64
VIII	THE VEIL RENT	74
IX	A BRUTE!	88
X	BROTHER AND SISTER	98
XI	THE SURPRISE	107
XII	IN SOCIETY	118
XIII	A COURT OF LOVE	131
XIV	ANNA FURENS	139
XV	INTERCESSION	148
XVI	A GOLDEN HAZE	157
XVII	THE ROASTING OF GEORGE	169
XVIII	THE DISCLOSURE	175
XIX	A GLASS OF WINE	186
XX	DOUBLE OR QUITS	195

CHAP.		PAGE
XXI	The Bowling-green	206
XXII	The Return of a Sash	218
XXIII	An Unexpected Summons	225
XXIV	Medea to the Rescue	233
XXV	Two in a Post-chaise	241
XXVI	The Flight in the Night	253
XXVII	The Return	264
XXVIII	The Captain at Bay	274
XXIX	Her Softer Side	284
XXX	Riding Lessons	293
XXXI	The Flood-gates Raised	304
XXXII	A Climax	315
XXXIII	In the Stable Court	326
XXXIV	Suspense	336
XXXV	The Better Part of Courage	347
XXXVI	Home	355
XXXVII	The Dullards that Men are!	365

QUEEN'S FOLLY

CHAPTER I

THE COTTAGE

MRS. SOUTH'S worn hand trembled on the yellowish ivory handle as she gave the tea-pot a last skilful twirl before she filled the three cups. Ruth's tongue rattled on, and Rachel hung midway, her attention divided between the extravagant fancies that tripped lightly from the child's lips, and the tender fears that brimmed the mother's eyes as often as they rested on her elder daughter. To enter fully into those fears would have needed a longer experience of life than Rachel possessed, seeing that in the main her experience was bounded by the sheltering walls of the thatched fuchsia-clad cottage before which, and barely a hundred yards away, the sea murmured and rippled. But the imminence of the parting that lay before her, and many a waking fear sobered the girl's thoughts, so that, even while she lent a half-willing ear to her sister's rose-coloured tale, her lip trembled in sympathy with her mother's apprehensions. She knew that she was leaving all whom she loved and all whom she knew, and leaving them to enter on a life unknown and untried. She knew that she was looking her last for many a day on the snug lamp-lit room, in which every object, from the kettle bubbling on the hob to the darned table-cloth and the dim oval mirror above the mantel, was familiar

to her ; and as her gaze took a slow farewell of each, a hand seemed to clutch her heart. She choked as she tried to swallow.

But youth is the season of hope as of courage, and Rachel had a brave spirit in her slender form. Rather than that her mother should divine the momentary panic that seized her, she would have bitten her tongue. She turned the choke into a laugh, and flirted a crumb at Ruth. "Oh, foolish Ruth!" she said in her elder-sister's voice. "Conquests and balls, silly child! Do you think that they come in the way of governesses? Little goose, I am going out for forty pounds a year and my coach-fare, and not for conquests. And to sit in my schoolroom with no fire on cold days and correct exercises, and not for balls. Balls, indeed! I am lucky, my dear, to get the place, and oh, mother, how it will help me afterwards—to have taught a Lady Ann! I wonder, shall I have to call her Lady Ann? Twelve years old and Lady Ann!"

Mrs. South looked her perplexity. "I'm sure I don't know," she answered, diverted for the moment from her deeper anxieties. "I think you should ask Lady Ellingham."

"Yes, mother, I suppose so."

"But la!" Ruth exclaimed, "what fun it will be for you! To live in a great house with Lord This and Lady That! Do you think that they will all wear stars on their coats?"

"My dear, I shall not see them once in a blue moon, and that will be at a mile off. I shall be upstairs with a globe and a blackboard and a pile of lesson-books. You may be sure that I shall see little enough of lords and ladies." And involuntarily Rachel winced as she recalled her terrible, terrible interview with Lady Elisabeth in the Close—the dreadful old lady with the silver-headed cane and the green shade over her sightless eyes, who had engaged her ;

who had called her "the young person," and had discussed her with her waiting-woman as freely and as inhumanly as if she had been a hundred miles away instead of standing, with trembling knees, within a pace of the old lady's high-backed chair. That painful interview had indeed driven Rachel to within an ace of withdrawal. For half an hour she had been minded to withdraw. Then the thought of her mother, and their need, had renewed her courage and steeled her heart.

But the memory remained. It had been a wretched ordeal. She might have been a stock or a stone for the little regard that had been paid to her sensibilities.

"How is the young person dressed, Puncheon?" the old lady had asked.

The waiting-woman had not even looked at her—her trained eye had taken all in at a glance. "In a tippet and a black bombazine with white spots, and a Tuscan trimmed black."

"No fringes or falbalas? You are sure of that?"

"No, my lady, quite plain-like."

"What sort of an air has she? Is she respectable?"

"I should say so, my lady."

"Handsome? Likely to take the fellows? And give trouble?"

For the first time the woman had glanced at the flushed, indignant face, with a gleam of fellow-feeling, but no spark of humour in her eyes. "The young lady is not ill-looking, my lady, but quiet-like."

"Demure, eh? Umph! Nine times out of ten they are the worst. But if she's no beauty she'll not fly above the chaplain, and that's his business. Ellingham is a rip, but he has an eye in his head and stoops only at game of a feather. Well, Mr. Dean answers for her French. Where," and she had poked her cane at the trembling girl, "did you get your accent, girl? I'm told it's passable."

"From M. Bourlay, the *émigré*, Madam."

"Umph! If poor George Selwyn were alive he'd

like nothing better than to try her. "But," she continued, fumbling in her lap for her gold snuff-box, "George and his kind are gone. There are no gentlemen now, Puncheon. They went out with wigs and silk stockings. Well, the young person may go. She'll hear from me. It's forty pounds and her coach-fare—d'you hear, Puncheon? And bid her behave herself in her station. But she's young and a woman, and bidding's no more than wind in the grass when a young spark makes a leg. There, let her go. I'm tired."

A dreadful interview and a terrible old lady! Rachel had gone from it to the Cathedral and had sat an hour, cooling her burning face and stemming the angry tears that would rise to her eyes. And for one-half of that time she had been minded to withdraw her application. But the thought of her mother, and a little also the thought of their good friend the Dean, who had recommended her, had prevailed. She had put the temptation from her, and gradually the unpleasant memory had faded, only to return with unhappy clearness now when it availed only to oppress the fluttering heart with a momentary panic.

But her mother was speaking, and Rachel struggled to control her feelings. "It's the servants I am afraid of," Mrs. South said, speaking out of her little store of experience. "In those great houses they are impudent. You must keep them in their place, my dear, or they will encroach. And you'll never forget, Rachel, that you are the great grandniece of Dr. South—Dr. South the divine, my dear. I hope you will never forget that, and tell them if it is necessary. I think they will respect you then."

"La, mother," Ruth cried, "how often you've told us that. I believe you'd like us to go about with a label round our necks: 'Great grandniece of Dr. South!' I should laugh to death if I saw Rachel with one."

"My dear, the truth is the truth," Mrs. South rejoined. "And where Rachel is going—among strangers—it will not be known. And she will be wise if she lets it be known, so that she may take her proper place. She might tell my lady, or the chaplain perhaps—he would be a proper person."

Rachel wondered—with a touch of irony, for already she was learning her worldly lesson—what Lady Elisabeth would have said to Dr. South. But she only replied that she would remember.

"And if you are asked down in the evening—as I should expect when the family are alone—you have your white muslin. But you look so young in it that I am not sure after all that it will be wise. And as to caps, you need not have taken to them for the next five years, seeing you are only nineteen turned, but in your position it may be expected. You had better ask the Countess."

"I will, mother."

"She'll be kind to you, I hope. I hear she is young, but you must not expect too much. And, oh dear, I wish someone was going with you. I think after all," she added nervously, "I had better come with you."

"And spend all that money, mother!" Rachel was stout about it. "And have to come back alone! No, indeed, ma'am. You know the coach always makes you ill. And M. Bourlay is to meet me at Exeter and see me into the coach, and after that there is but the one change at Salisbury. Oh, I shall do very well, I assure you."

"And you'll write at once? I shall not have a happy moment until I hear from you."

"Indeed I will. And perhaps Lady Ellingham will give me a frank so that it will cost you nothing."

"And you'll tell us everything? If the child sleeps in your room, and what your hours are?"

"And what Lady Ellingham wears," Ruth put in

eagerly. "And what company they have. And be sure to tell me if Lord Ellingham wears his star. Oh, what a letter we shall have, mother! And don't forget to tell us when you wear your white muslin, and which sash with it. La, Rachel, I would like to see you primming it in your cap, as if you were an old maid! I'll be bound you'll look as mild as a mouse."

Rachel's thoughts strayed for a moment to the white muslin, and, if the truth be told, drew some comfort from the contemplation of it and of the blue and the black sash that went with it. And the caps might be premature, but when tried on before her tiny glass upstairs they had seemed not unbecoming. Then the strange folk among whom she was going? They could not be all forbidding and rude like Lady Elisabeth. They could not be all old and inhuman. Lady Ellingham was young and might be kind.

So she tried, and not in vain, to rally her spirits. But the last evening, and that half spent! Her lip trembled in spite of all her efforts. A few hours, so few that she could number them on her fingers, and she would have looked her last for a long, long year on the loving faces and the dear home-things that had cradled her from infancy; on Richard, the white-whiskered tabby, that she had teased and fondled so often; on the stool on which she had sat and crooned her doll to sleep, and the cottage dresser beneath which she had kept shop and sold currant-water for wine; on a hundred things endeared to her by recollections of work and play, and above all on the worn face of the mother whose love had warmed her and sheltered her all the days of her life—the life that had seemed at times dull and tedious, but now held out clinging arms to her, dressed itself in the colours of home, offered its lap of peace and security.

Now she must leave all and enter a formal and unfriendly world, where she must stand alone, unfended and unwelcome, just a machine, priced and paid for —a young person, as Lady Elisabeth had styled her.

But though Rachel quailed on the threshold of the hard road that tens of thousands, young and timid as she, have travelled, the lonely road that leaves on one side love and maidens' dreams, she had a brave heart, and her spirit rose on the wings of youth. For after all this was adventure. For her no coming out, no first ball with its wakeful hours of anticipation and the delicious tremors that set the feet dancing; but instead this faring-forth with its charm of the untried and the unknown, its call on nerve and will, its vague promise. So she forced a smiling word, and chid Ruth for her extravagances, even while she noted with a pang her mother's toil-hardened hands, her greying hair, her careworn face.

Fortunately there were still things to do, even after the tea-cups were gone; and be sure that among the odds and ends to be packed Bath post was not forgotten, though, "La, mother," Ruth remonstrated, "there'll be paper there—hot-pressed and I don't know what!"

"Yes, mother, there will be sure to be writing-paper."

But Mrs. South was not to be moved. "I don't know what there may be. But you'll take some, Rachel. I shall be miserable if I don't know that you have it and can write at any moment. There is no knowing in great houses what there is and what there is not. And don't you wait, child, for franks or anything of that kind. And now," she added, with an anxious look at the clock, "we must go to bed if you are to leave at six."

Fine words! But what mother could bear to cut short the last evening? What mother's heart could rob itself of those last moments over the expiring

fire when all had been done and the breakfast-cups stood ready on the table? Was there not always some new caution to be given, some word of advice to be repeated? Or some mute caress, some loving glance? At length, however, the moment came. The lamp was extinguished, the wood embers were raked together, they passed, candle in hand, into the little passage where Rachel's cowhide trunk, lying small and lonely at the foot of the stairs, dealt their hearts a fresh blow.

But, at the head of the steep flight which Rachel's childish feet had trodden a thousand times, the mother's heart revolted. "Do you go to Rachel's bed, my dear," she said to Ruth. "She may sleep with me to-night. I have something to say to her." And when Ruth would have demurred, Mrs. South's face stayed the remonstrance.

Alone with her child and with the door closed on them the mother's composure gave way. "Oh, my lamb, my lamb!" she cried, and she folded the wanderer to her breast. "God keep you! You don't know what is before you, and I don't. But I know that it is a hard world, and you'll need to be wise. You are going among strangers and you'll have cold words, and cold looks, and some, maybe, that may not be cold, but may be worse. Oh, my own, promise me that you will be careful. That you will think of me waiting and watching and hungering for a word. You'll think of me, Rachel, if trouble comes or—or temptation? For I have only you and Ruth, and Ruth I can fend for, while you, you must fend for yourself. You'll think, my darling, won't you?"

But what more she said and what Rachel promised her, as the two women clung together under the humble sloping roof—are there not things so sacred, so hallowed by love that even a bird of the air may not carry them abroad?

CHAPTER II

FARING FORTH

M. BOURLAY—some called him M. de Bourlay, but no one in Exeter knew whether he had a right to the particle, the status of the *émigrés* being a standing puzzle to John Bull—danced up and down and waved his little cocked hat after the coach. "Bon voyage! Au revoir et à bientôt!" he cried. And heedless of ridicule and of the grinning loafers before Foot's hotel, he blew kisses after his pupil, until, to the lilting notes of "Oh dear, what can the matter be?" that mounted from the guard's key-bugle into the crisp early air, the coach swung out of sight round a corner.

It was not until this, the last strand that bound her to home, had parted, and she knew that for some hours she had only to sit with her feet in the straw and await her fate, that Rachel gave way and cried a little in her corner. She could do so unwatched, for she had but two companions, a stout tradesman and his stouter wife, and they were too busy blaming one another for the tardiness that had nearly cost them their seats, to pay heed to the little girl in the bonnet and tippet who sat so still in her place. By the time the team had struggled up Straightway Hill, youth, the changing scene, and the sunshine of a fine morning had made their claim, and Rachel had dried her tears.

It was the first of September, and here and there she saw sportsmen with their dogs crossing the stubble

or wading through turnips. At Honiton volunteers were drilling in the wide street, sharp orders rang out, men, with their pouches flapping against their legs, ran to and fro, and there was a stir and a glitter; a reflection of the war that in this last year of the century was beating against the South Coast, and rousing stout hearts to meet the threat of invasion. A brace of officers climbed to the box-seat but travelled only as far as Chard, where orderlies met them with led horses, and there was much parade and saluting. Rachel viewed it all with young, curious eyes, and despite her sad thoughts was interested. She saw things that she had never seen before, and what with these stirring interludes and the common traffic of the highway with its unending stream of coaches and chaises, harvest wains and London wagons, and the hamlets that, strung along the road like a chain of beads, came so often and passed so quickly, the time went by. Before she was aware of it they were over Windwhistle Hill and descending with groaning brakes into Crewkerne. Here, before the Mermaid, they came to rest, the many-caped coachman flung down his whip, the travellers descended, the waiters cried, "Dinner, gentlemen, dinner!"

Rachel, timid and strange, would fain have kept her seat. She had no appetite, and the value of money, that she was now to earn, pressed upon her. But she had to resist the clamour not only of the waiters but of her fellow-travellers. "God bless thee, my dear!" the fat man adjured her, "never miss a meal. There's no lining keeps up the heart like beef and pudding! And the celery at this house is a treat!" So she had to move, but instead of entering the inn she walked a little way down the street and in a quiet corner ate the sandwiches, on which there fell a salt tear or two, as she thought of the loving hands that had packed them. But she reminded herself that she was now to play a stout part in the world, and

when she returned to her seat and the coach filled up, she showed a composed face.

A young man in the farthest corner thought it a face worth staring at, and Rachel might have found his attention embarrassing if she had not had more solid ground for annoyance. The tradesman had taken his fill not only of the beef and pudding, but of the Mermaid's strong ale. He was drowsy, and every five minutes he fell over and crushed her out of sight in a manner as absurd as it was uncomfortable. Then the coach grew noisy as it grew crowded. Two of the new-comers fell to wrangling over this talk of invasion, the one maintaining that it was all a hum, a flam, a trick of they government chaps to clap on new taxes and take more lads from the plough-tail; while, "Ay, I smoke your sort," the other retorted with disdain. "But I'm thinking you'll sing to another tune when you're burnt in your bed one of these dark nights."

"If my stacks be fired," the farmer replied with ponderous certainty, "I'm bound 'twon't be Bony nor they Frenchies, mister! More like some o' your peacock-dressed, tearing, swearing, yeomanry lads. Just kiss-the-maids they be! That's what they be, drat 'em!"

The other turned up his eyes. "You're a Methodist, my man! That's what it is, I see!"

The farmer swelled till his face was purple. "A Methodist!" he bawled. "I'd have you know, young man, I'm a churchwarden! Churchwarden of Weston-under-Panwood these seven years."

"Two pipes and a tabor!" his opponent muttered, shifting his ground unfairly.

"And sung 'God save the King' every Sunday of my life since His Majesty's late illness—which the Lord knows what it was, but 'twas a mystery. And damme, He will save him too, but 'twon't be by any o' your Joseph-coated, henroost-robbing lads—a plague

to honest men they be! But by Lord Nelson and Admiral Cornwallis as I pay my rent to! I'll answer for it, as long as oak swims, they'll never let no Frenchman come within sight o' you, little man!"

A third brawler burst in on this, and the dispute roused Rachel's neighbour from his beery slumbers. He sat up, and, while the change freed the girl from bodily discomfort, it only left her mind at greater liberty to dwell on the trials before her. She had a nervous dread of the change which she must make at Salisbury. Suppose she could not get her trunk out in time! Or suppose, unaccustomed to the flurry of the coach office, she entered the wrong coach and travelled Heaven knew whither! Still, the change was a small matter after all, and doubtless she would compass it in one way or another; but beyond it loomed, ever more near, things that filled her heart with dread. The arrival at the great house, her entrance—she saw herself so small and lonely a figure!—her reception by a crowd of servants. Then the first meal in strange surroundings, the introduction to her ladyship, to her pupil—she did not know at the prospect of which of these things her heart beat most painfully. And they were all coming nearer; with every mile, with every hour, they rose more tremendous before her. When the coach changed horses at Shaftesbury she did not know whether she longed for the end, or felt suspense less intolerable. She only knew that she yearned with passion for the bedtime hour when these trials would be behind her and she might be alone with a little space in which to gather courage for the morrow. And still—for now they were away again—the coach swung inexorably onward, uphill and downhill, and the men swore and wrangled, and the tradesman's wife snored in the opposite corner.

A little waif going forth into a hard world! Her feet were cold, her throat was dry, she swallowed continually. Her eyes now anxiously reviewed the

small parcels that she had with her, now scanned the passing scene lest the first houses of Salisbury should surprise her. Long before they sighted the graceful, soaring spire she fancied the city at hand ; three times she collected her possessions and sat on thorns, wondering how she should make her way to the distant door from which so many burly knees divided her.

But at last Salisbury came. They cantered along Fisherton Street and over the bridge, swept through the Market Place and, turning right-handed into Catherine Street, stopped, to the merry music of the bugle, before the White Hart. Rachel clutched her packets and got to her feet. But, alas, all were for alighting, and she was last. When she did emerge she found herself in a crowd, pushed this way and that and unregarded, and it was not until the coachman discovered her and flipped her half-crown into his pocket that she gained attention. With all his majesty, he was a good-natured man with an eye for females in distress, and he spoke to the guard, and presently her trunk was hunted out and handed down. A stable-helper in a moleskin cap shouldered it. "Where away, miss ?" he cried. He was in a hurry —everyone seemed to be in a hurry.

"The Ringwood coach," she said. "It starts from here ?"

The man grinned. "It do, miss—to-morrow morning !"

Panic seized her. "Oh, but—but I was told that it met this coach," she stammered. She had foreseen nothing as bad as this.

"It did—yesterday. It don't to-day. Summer coach, d'you see, miss ? 'Twere took off the road yesterday."

She stood bewildered. People were pressing about her, cutlers' apprentices were showing and offering their wares, others were entering and leaving the yard ; she had much ado not to be pushed into the not ov[illegible] clean

6554 11-7/4

water-channel flowing on the farther side of the way —she was such a light little thing anyone could thrust her aside. "But what am I do to?" she pleaded. "I must be at Ringwood this evening."

"You can post, o' course."

"Oh, dear, dear!" Posting was a terrible expense, she knew. "How far is it, please?"

"I dunno, miss. You'd best ask in the yard."

She was ready to cry. She had received her bare fare from Salisbury to Ringwood, and she knew that to post would cost infinitely more. Faintly she asked how much it would be.

But the man had another job in prospect. "You'd best ask in the yard," he said, and dumped her trunk down inside the archway. "There! The master is there now. He'll tell you." He hurried away.

Her heart in her mouth, Rachel walked into the yard. A burly man was giving orders to a knot of helpers, who were running out the new team. The coachman, a tankard in his hand, stood at the man's elbow, a servant hung behind waiting for a word, in the passages on the left bells were ringing and chambermaids hurrying, from the red-curtained windows on the same side faces looked out. Rachel, in an agony between shyness and impatience, was pausing, uncertain what to do, when the burly man's eye fell on her. He broke off and stepped towards her. "What for you, miss?" he asked.

"I expected to meet the Ringwood coach here," she explained. "Now I am told that it does not go."

"Quite right, miss."

"Then what am I to do?"

"Well, you can either post or stay the night. There's a coach at eleven in the morning."

"What will it cost to post?" she asked anxiously.

"To Ringwood, miss?"

"Yes, I am going to Queen's Folly. It's near Ringwood, I understand."

"Queen's Folly!" The man's manner changed a shade. "Well, it's seventeen miles to Ringwood—the Folly's seven miles farther. One-and-six out and ninepence in—call it two pounds, miss, to Ringwood." Then, seeing her dismayed face, "If expense is any matter, it will be cheaper to stay the night," he continued. "The coach fare is a crown. But if you'll step into the coffee-room I'll come to you by and by." He pointed to the door on the left of the yard. "You, Joe, shove the young lady's trunk in the passage."

There seemed to be nothing else to be done, and Rachel crept into the coffee-room. Some travellers were swallowing a hasty meal at the table, but no one heeded her, and she slid into the darkest corner, and sat, clutching her parcels and wondering what she ought to do. If she posted she would have to spend two pounds out of a purse slenderly filled, and would arrive almost penniless. On the other hand, she was to be met at Ringwood, and if she stayed the night here what would happen? The dull room with its smell of ale and pickles, the heavy sideboard, the smouldering fire supplied no answer. The travellers rose presently, and trooped noisily out, and she was alone, but no nearer a solution. Before the landlord came she must make up her mind.

It seemed that he was in no haste to come. She heard the coach start, and, fearing all things now, feared that she was forgotten. She moved to a window and looked into the yard to learn if he was still there. He was there, and so close to the window that instinctively she retreated behind the red curtain. He was talking to a tall man in a cocked hat, who wore a shabby cloak over some sort of uniform: a plain, blackish-looking man with a long, thin nose and very keen eyes. She had but one glance at him, then he and the landlord passed out of sight, but an instant later, the door of the room being ajar, she heard their voices in the passage.

"In half an hour," the stranger said—and she thought his voice as harsh as his features. "And, Turpin, tell that d—d rascal Sam that he shall have his skinful of ale at the house. But if he starts drunk again he'll wish himself triced up to the crosstrees in a gale of wind, for I'll break every bone in his body!"

"I'll see he starts sober, Captain," the other replied respectfully. "I suppose"—Turpin seemed to hesitate—"her ladyship's not at the Folly?"

"No, man. Why?"

"There's a young lady in the house that says she's going there. Meant to go by the coach that was taken off yesterday."

"A young lady?"

"So she told me, Captain."

"Then she lied," the Captain replied bluntly, "if she told you she was a young lady. One of the servants with a pretty face, that's got on your blind side, man."

"Well, I don't know." The landlord seemed to doubt. "She looked a bit better than that to me. And I see all sorts, sir."

"Ay, but set a pretty face before you, and——" He broke off, and, in a different tone, and as if to himself, "No, it can't be that!" he muttered. "He's not there, and, damme, he's not come down to that yet. No!" Then, sharply to Turpin, "What's she like, man? Gay?"

"No, sir, as quiet as a mouse. To tell the truth——"

"Well?"

"I made bold to think that, as you were going over, you might perhaps——"

"Take her with me?" The stranger laughed discordantly. "You be hanged! I think I see myself! You take me for my lord, Turpin. No petticoats and no reefer's tricks for me! I'm too old by many years. But there, I've a letter to write, and must get to the pot-hooks."

And, humming to himself in a tuneless voice :

"Oh, Hood and Howe and Jervis
Are masters of the main,
Cornwallis sweeps the narrow seas
And logs the weather-vane,"

he strode into the coffee-room, crossed the floor and seized the bell-rope. He pulled it violently, and instead of standing to wait, as four men out of five would have done, fell at once to pacing between door and window.

"And Duncan in his seventy-four,
His Venerable seventy-four,
From freezing Texel to the Nore
Brings Mynheer to his knees.

Here, John," as the waiter hastened in, "you lazy devil, find me a quill and an inkhorn. And when you have done that, bring me a dish of catlap—and move all this clutter!" He thrust forcibly aside half a dozen clattering plates. "Damme, man, the place is as dirty as a reefers' mess!"

"Won't be a minute, sir!" John replied, and flew to obey the order at a pace very different from that at which he had attended on the chance travellers.

CHAPTER III

THE CAPTAIN

THE Captain resumed his pacing—six short steps and a turn, six short steps and a turn.

"But Hood and Howe and Jervis,
Cornwallis, Camperdown,
May step across to leeward
And haul their pennants down.
For Nelson's on the weather deck,
Lord Admiral Nelson walks the deck,
Turns his blind eye to squall and wreck,
Our Michael of the Seas."

He hummed his doggerel to the end as freely as if he had been alone. But Rachel, cowering in her shadowy corner, knew the precise moment when his eyes alighted on her, although he only betrayed the discovery by a single searching glance. He continued to pace to and fro until John returned and cleared a corner of the table.

Rachel had heard all that the stranger had said in the passage, and though she had not understood the whole, she had mettle enough to resent the tone in which he had spoken of her. And she longed to escape before the horrid man addressed her. But he was between her and the door, and while she wavered he sat down to write. He seemed in his height and his blackness—for he still wore his cloak—both ugly and formidable, and she was not sure that he did not from time to time glance up and inspect her in the mirror before him. Suddenly, "How do you

spell ' bergamot ' ? " he shot out. " One *t* or two ? "

" One."

The word sprang from her lips before she was aware, drawn from her by the thrust of the question. The next moment her cheeks burned and she longingly looked at the door ; but the distance between her and it seemed to have grown, and to reach the door she must pass by him. Meantime he coolly finished his letter, folded and directed it. When John entered with the tea, he stepped to the door and went out.

But not beyond the passage. She heard him call : " Turpin ! "

Apparently Turpin was at hand, for, " Who the deuce is she ? " the stranger asked, in a tone somewhat more subdued.

" Well, I'm thinking, sir, she might be the young lady's governess."

" I'm hanged if she is ! Her ladyship was saying this morning that it was high time she got one. What are you doing about her ? "

" Well, sir, she must post or stay. She'll do whichever's cheaper, I'm thinking."

" Umph ! Well, d—n the girl ! I'll speak to her."

If there had been two doors Rachel would have run out by the other—the man was becoming a terror to her. But before she could move a yard he was back again, and this time he turned to her and looked her over as coolly as if she had been a limpet. A tremulous mouth, good eyes, a turned-up nose, he told himself ; fair curls, a bonnet and tippet—she might be a governess after all—looked like it, but devilish young !

" You're going to Queen's Folly ? " he said.

Rachel resented his interference, but after a moment's hesitation she answered the question. " Yes," she said.

" Her ladyship is not there. You know that, I suppose, ma'am ? "

"No, sir."

"You did not know it?"

"No."

"Well, you know it now. Do you still wish to go, young lady?"

"Yes." She shot out the word, for she was growing angry. What business had he to question her?

But he had not done. "Why, if you please?" he asked coolly. "What is your business there?"

Rachel went rather white, but her eyes sparkled with resentment. "That is my business, sir," she said. "I do not know what right you have to question me."

"Ho! ho! An angry robin, eh?" For a second a glint of something—sarcasm, humour, amusement—shone in his sharp eyes. "Well, it's a little of my business too, ma'am. I am Lord Ellingham's brother, and now you know that perhaps you won't refuse to answer my question."

Poor Rachel's plumes drooped. "I am the new governess," she said meekly.

"The devil you are! Governess to whom, may I ask?"

"To Lady Ann Dunstan." There were tears in her eyes. The man was rude and stared at her as if he did not believe her.

Now, however, he seemed to be surprised on his side. "To Ann?" he exclaimed. "And who signed you on, young woman?"

"Who—I don't understand."

"Who engaged you?" he repeated impatiently. "Signed articles with you? That's English, I suppose."

"Lady Elisabeth—at Exeter." Rachel spoke with dignity, and did not guess how violent was the retort that her frightened face and quivering mouth curbed on his lips.

Even as it was, "D—d old vixen!" he muttered· "Must she make mischief too!"

For a moment he stood, pondering darkly. Then, "You're but a little thing," he said, measuring her with a disparaging eye. "Have you seen your pupil?"

"No, sir."

"Well, she's pretty near as tall as you, and a sight broader in the beam! And a rare handful, I can tell you, with as many tricks and turns as a sea-lawyer. You don't look to me one to bring her up with a short turn! Do you know what you'll do if you take my advice, young woman?"

"No!" Rachel spoke sharply. She was growing restive again. She was beginning to ask herself with spirit what this man who stood over her, frowning her down, had to do with it. He might be the uncle of her pupil, but—— "No!" she repeated.

"Well, you'd heave to and put about. That's what you'd do. And look for another berth."

"I don't see, sir, what you——"

"You'd take the next coach back," he continued. "That's my advice. Do you take it, young lady. Or, believe me, you'll find yourself in irons off a lee shore."

But Rachel was one of those who, left to themselves, are meek and yielding, but pushed to the wall, react against force. For a space the man's presence, his masterful tone and black looks had imposed on her; but now she asked herself what right he had to dictate to her, to bid her change her plans and abandon her prospects. And stiffly, with a little air of dignity, not ill assumed, "I shall do nothing of the kind," she said. "I have been properly engaged, sir, and until my employer dis—discharges me"—her voice trembled, for alas! her dignity was but skin-deep after all—"I shall carry out my plans and—and be guided only by those who have authority over me."

She expected an angry outburst, and hardened

herself to meet it. Instead a whimsical smile for a moment transformed the man's harsh features. "Lord!" he said, "what a cock-sparrow it is! I am to keep my own side of the deck, am I? Hands off, eh? But no! No, young lady," calmly interposing himself as Rachel rose and made a move towards the door, "one moment. If you mean to go on, there's more to be said."

Her little head was in the air. "I do not wish to hear it, sir," she said.

"But," he rejoined, "you've got to hear it, damme if you haven't! Lord, to listen to you, you might be Kitty herself. You've got to hear it. If this is not my business it's chock-a-block to it. If you're going on I must take you, I suppose."

"Oh no!" she cried, all her dignity dropping from her. "If you please, I would rather, far rather——"

"Rather what? Shape your own course, eh? Go your own way? No, no, young woman, if you go on, you belong to my convoy, and you'll obey orders and keep the line, or you'll be whipped into it with a shot across your bows. Have you had any tea?"

"No," Rachel faltered. "I don't want any."

"Fiddlesticks!" He pointed to the tray. "There, it's your job to pour out." He stepped to the bell and pulled it with the violence with which he seemed to do everything. "Another cup!" he commanded. "And tell your master the young lady will go with me. Horses at the door in"—he consulted his watch —"in ten minutes! No!" addressing the girl in the same sharp tone, "fill for yourself! Petticoats first. No sugar for me."

She had to obey, and until John returned he walked up and down, to all appearance as regardless of her as if she had not been present. He drank his tea, standing at the table, while she hid her hot face in her cup or gazed with fearful interest at the cocked hat that he had cast upon the table. With what

strange things, what strange situations, was her start in life bringing her into contact! With what unpleasant, impossible personages! If she must judge of the family by him, for what a lot was she cast, what a reception she must expect! And if her pupil was as turbulent and rude as he painted her, what difficulties lay before her! If *he* described Lady Ann as turbulent, what must she be! Rachel's heart sank into her boots, and clearly she foresaw that her stay in her first situation would not be lengthy.

Still from these horrors some short space still separated her. More dreadful loomed the two hours that she must spend in the man's company, and not only in his company but shut up with him in the narrow space of a post-chaise, and conscious, every minute of the time, of his disapproval. She dreamt for a moment of surrender, dwelt on the possibility of yielding. She tasted the joy of release alike from present misery and from future trials. She saw herself in the night coach, returning to the dear home, the very prospect of which brought tears to her eyes.

But Rachel had a clear head as well as a sturdy will, and it needed but the briefest reflection to assure her that the return journey would not be the care-free jaunt that fancy had for a few seconds painted, but a weary nightmare of repentance and self-reproach. The return of the vanquished!

So, when the chaise came jingling down the yard—they saw it pass—and he said curtly, "Signal's up, young woman! But it is not too late to change your mind. Still for going on, eh?"—which seemed to prove that he had observed her more closely than she supposed—she rose with a composed air.

"Certainly, sir, if you please."

"Well," he rejoined gruffly, "I don't please. But you've had your warning. Line ahead."

She went out before him. The landlord and a knot of servants were gathered to see them start, and she

had to run the gauntlet of them all. The Captain said a word to Turpin that drew a smile, he stepped in and the door was closed. The chaise rumbled under the archway, turned before the dead wall of the Close with its bordering water-channel, and swung away down Exeter Street.

Rachel had had little to do with men, and had never been in such close contact with a man before, and she gazed out of the window in an agony of shyness. She watched the houses go by, and apparently her companion did the same, for they were clear of the city and were passing Longford Park wall before he gave a sign of life. Then he began again—but absently—to hum his old ditty:

> "Oh, Hood and Howe and Jervis
> Are masters of the main,
> Cornwallis sweeps the narrow seas
> And logs the weather-vane."

He hummed it to the close. Then, if she might judge from the sound, for she did not dare to turn her head, he took out some papers, and for a while he busied himself with them. In the end he put them up again, and with his wonted abruptness, "This your first cruise?"

"Yes."

"Umph! What's your age, young lady?"

She longed to snub him for his impertinence—he really was intolerable! But she had not the courage, and "Nineteen," she said meekly.

"By gad, then, you've a nerve, ma'am, and just off the stocks. But look out for squalls, and north-easters too, by Jove! And don't say you haven't been warned!"

She made no reply to this. She decided that he was bent on frightening her and she was stubbornly determined not to be frightened, or at any rate not to betray her fears. He began to troll his eternal

chanty again, and presently out of sheer impatience she did a thing that she would have thought impossible, but the words were out before she was aware. "Why Michael?" she asked.

She coloured with vexation the moment she had spoken, but it was too late. "Why Michael?" he repeated flatly. "Well, why not?"

"Why not"—she was in for it now and must go on—"why not St. George, or—or St. Patrick?" she stammered.

"St. George for Merry England, eh? Come, you've heard of Nelson before, I suppose, young lady?"

"Of course!" she replied resentfully.

"Ever heard where he was born?"

"At—in Norfolk, at Burnham Thorpe!" She was indignant that he should suppose her so ignorant as not to know that.

"When?"

She had to acknowledge reluctantly that she did not know.

"And you call yourself a governess!" he retorted. "Why, there's many a topman, that can't tell big A from little B, that could teach you that. He was born on Michaelmas Day, Miss Wisdom. And so was another, of whom you may have heard by chance. Ever heard of Lord Clive?"

"Of course I have."

"Well, he was born on Michaelmas Day too! Michael's sons both of 'em, and born with a sword in their fists instead of a silver spoon in their mouths! Lord, ma'am, and you didn't know that! And I'll wager you don't know on what day St. Vincent was fought?"

He was really a horrid man! But this time she did know the answer—by chance. "St. Valentine's Day," she shot out.

He chuckled openly. "Ay, that's more to do with you. The women all remember that. The V. battle.

Fought off St. Vincent's on Valentine's Day, flagship the *Victory*, Commander-in-Chief, Earl St. Vincent, as he now is ! And d—d well fought too, Tartar as he is, saving your presence. But I can tell you, ma'am, you'll have to be smarter than you are ! If you don't keep a good look-out, it will be Ann will be teaching you ! ''

Rachel could have cried with mortification, but she was too nervous to retort, and, satisfied with his triumph—which she felt to be as unfair as it was crotchety and absurd—the wretch fell to whistling to himself. The carriage rolled on along the flat road near the clear-flowing Avon with its border of willows and water-meadows, fringed on either hand, but at a distance, by low wooded heights. Soon they crossed the river at what she took to be Fordingbridge. The woods on the left began to rise more steeply against a greenish evening sky, and by the time they had swung round the church at Ringwood and traversed the village, leaving its long causeway and rustic wharves with their piles of timber away to the right, the day was closing in, twilight was upon them. They turned their backs on the meadows over which the river-mist was drawing a veil, and began to climb a winding sandy road that mounted in a mile or two to stretches of melancholy moorland, waste and bleak, dipping here and there, but not where their way traversed it, into narrow gorges, outlined for them by dark lines of tree-tops. The evening wind blew cold across the heath, peewits wailed shrilly in the twilight. Rachel shivered. Her mind sank under the weight of loneliness and depression that the scene suggested and that the strangeness of all that she saw redoubled. With the welcome and happy lights of home before her she must still have owned the influence of place and hour, of the barren treeless upland, the wailing birds, the growing dusk. But as it was, with all that she loved left behind her in another world—for indeed it seemed so

to her—with no prospect before her more cheerful than that on which she gazed, no welcome to anticipate save one that filled her with nervous dread, it was as much as, it was almost more than she could do, gripping one hand in the other, to keep back the sobs that in the presence of this man would be the last humiliation.

That she did keep them back, lonely little soul, was to her credit—men have gone on forlorn hopes and have won medals and crosses at less cost.

Suddenly they swerved off the road that ran like pale ribbon across the moorland. They began to descend, and about them solitary thorn-trees, gnarled and ghostly, started up, breaking the waste. Presently they were driving through dark woods, they passed between two stone pillars—gateless—they rolled smoothly along a grand avenue flanked by a black wall of trees set far back on either side. At length—for to her trembling in her corner the avenue seemed to be endless—the postboys cracked their whips, the jaded horses mustered a canter, she saw before her a long pile of building, in which a meagre light or two showed at one end.

"Thank God, that's over!" her companion muttered. "We are there!" He yawned as he stretched his long legs and prepared to alight.

CHAPTER IV

AT QUEEN'S FOLLY

MRS. JEMMETT set down her breakfast-cup on the round table and took a leisurely look at Rachel. She had looked at the girl "a many times" before, as she said later in the day, but her doubts remained unsolved. The housekeeper was a comfortable-looking woman who filled her bodice as efficiently as she filled her place, but she had considering eyes and a close-shut mouth which did not always let her thoughts escape. "Some is touchy, particularly at the start," she continued. "But I thought that you would be as well here, miss, until the family returns."

"I think it is very nice here," Rachel replied. And in truth the housekeeper's homely room, which looked on a plot of rough grass, cut off from the garden by a beech hedge, had seemed to her a very haven of rest on her arrival the evening before. "I should have been lonely upstairs—until," she added with a sudden remembrance of Dr. South and her mother's caution, "the family returns."

"Well, so I thought. Besides," Mrs. Jemmett added candidly, "it would have been a heap more trouble to wait on you upstairs and me short-handed. Indeed I'd fine work to get a bed aired at such short notice. And what her ladyship——"

"Yes?" Rachel said, for the housekeeper had paused.

"Oh, nothing, miss. Only perhaps her ladyship may like to make her own arrangements when she comes."

"There's no one here now, then?"

"Only the Captain. He's a dockyarding or what not, at Southampton, and goes and comes. He's been to London and goes to-morrow. The children come down on Monday and her ladyship follows Tuesday—that's this day week. To be sure, we shall have Mr. Girardot Friday, and he's like a smile in the house. He livens everybody up, I will say that; but don't you lose your heart to him, miss," she added with a thin smile.

Rachel winced. "Who is Mr. Girardot?" she asked.

"The tutor, miss, and everybody's favourite, except, maybe, the Captain's. I don't know as he does favour him, but there, there couldn't be two more different, and the Captain would be no worse if he were a little more like him on the outside."

"That was Captain Dunstan who brought me yesterday?"

"To be sure, miss. Captain the Honourable George Dunstan, his lordship's brother."

"Then Lord Ellingham does not come with the family?"

"No, not at once. You've not," she continued with an odd searching look at the girl, "met his lordship?"

"No."

"Then—if I may ask, miss—who made the arrangement?"

The same question! Rachel began to tire of it, to find something strange in it. But she answered it once more. "Lady Elisabeth, who lives at Exeter."

"Ah!"

"I suppose—she is often here?"

"No, miss, not often." The housekeeper rubbed her nose thoughtfully. "Indeed I don't know when she was here. The truth is, Lady Elisabeth and her ladyship don't hit it off—not over well, so to speak."

Well, that was good news at any rate. With Lady

Elisabeth at a distance and the Captain leaving to-morrow, she might hope for better things. Rachel's heart was lightened, and when Mrs. Jemmett offered to conduct her to the schoolroom she rose with alacrity.

It proved to be a small room on the second floor, and dull and shabby as became its purpose—what children's room in that age was other than dull, or was furnished with aught that had not seen its best days elsewhere ? A door covered with red baize and closing with a spring shut it off, and Rachel's bedroom with it ; and from the long corridor, just outside this door, a narrow staircase ran down to a side entrance, which the housekeeper hinted that the governess was expected to use. "You'll live and have your meals here, miss," she explained. "The young ladyship's room, and her maid's, are underneath these. She'll take her tea with you I expect, and Lord Bodmin when he's a mind."

Rachel had not yet savoured the monotony of a lonely life, and she eyed her little domain with relief and even with satisfaction. Dull the room was, but its single window looked on the green forest-glades that on that side ran up to the house ; and below the window the sun was shining on stately oaks, here lifting themselves from a carpet of moss, there standing foot-deep in fern. A brace of forest ponies were feeding a hundred paces away, and wood-pigeons cooed in neighbouring branches. She gazed with pleasure on a scene so novel and did not stay to consider what its aspect might be when the trees dripped, bare and leafless, under a February sky.

"Well, miss, I must go now," the housekeeper continued briskly. "And you'd best learn your way about. The Captain is out with his gun and you'll be free to go where you please. When the family is back it will be another thing."

Rachel availed herself of the offer, and before she descended peeped into the rooms on the upper floors, wondering at their number, at the size of some and the

shrouded splendour of others—of one in particular, that panelled in blue silk and furnished with gilt-legged chairs and tables, strewn with bibelots and framed work, she judged to be Lady Ellingham's boudoir. The grand staircase, flanked by a descending line of tall grim portraits, of ladies caressing dogs, and officers grasping sword-hilts, struck her with awe, which the entrance hall, with its stags' heads and its old armour, did not lessen. Pushing a heavy mahogany door she found herself in a vast dining-room, and here were more portraits ; gentlemen in blue with collarless coats, and ladies in white with tuckers that, it seemed to her, might have been higher. Beyond this she entered, feeling all the time as if she were watched, a sombre library, where walls of dull quartos and folios looked down on the antics of a monstrous faun that held the middle of the floor and seemed to be capering for the amusement of the white marble Venuses that lurked each in her corner—a silent tomb-like room, the legacy she guessed of a past generation.

In one of the great sheeted reception rooms the housekeeper found her, and with the air of one conferring a favour twitched the linen cover from a glass cabinet. "There, miss," she said with pride, "there's the gold inkstand as the Queen gave her ladyship when she finished her waiting, and the gold needle-case as the Princess Royal gave her, and the miniature as the Queen gave her on her birthday. She married out of her waiting—very young she was, and maybe she'd ha' been wiser if she'd waited until——"

"Yes ?" Rachel said, for Mrs. Jemmett's voice had trickled into silence.

The housekeeper coughed discreetly. "Well, she was young to marry," she said. And covering the cabinet, she presently went away, murmuring something about her work.

Feeling her insignificance in the spacious rooms, Rachel wandered out and viewed the long white front

of the house, embayed in the middle where the entrance looked on a semicircular space framing four plots of lawn and enclosed by an ironwork railing, gilt in parts and pierced by three grand entrances. Each of these opened on a separate avenue that, running through the forest, presented to the eye a solemn vista, narrowing till it reached the sky-line.

Rachel liked that side least. Even on a bright day its gloomy magnificence oppressed her. It was a relief to find her way round the house to the gardens in the rear, and so by an iron gate to the open glades, where the cawing of rooks, the hum of bees and the chirr of grasshoppers, rejoicing in the warmth, gave life to the scene.

It did not occur to her as she wandered about, grateful for this unlooked-for respite, that she was matter for discussion. But in the housekeeper's room a good deal was being said about her by Mrs. Jemmett and Bowles the butler. Bowles was a widower living in his own cottage and at present pleasantly off duty. The housekeeper rubbed her nose. "To look at her," she decided, "butter wouldn't melt in her mouth, but what she knows and what she don't know passes me. A little slip of a girl, you'd think the mother's milk wasn't dry on her lips. I don't know as we've a right to suspect his lordship, for it's not like him, wild as he is! But with my lady knowing no more of her coming than the babe unborn, I do say it is queer."

"But if she's not good-looking, Mrs. J.?"

"I'd not say that, Bowles. Handsome she's not, but there's a look in her eyes that maybe'd fetch a man that had a taste that way, and her nose tilts in a taking sort. And though she's on the small side she's a pretty shape what there is of her."

"I like 'em plump myself," Bowles said, with an appraising eye on the lady's ample bodice. "Give me a woman with something to her, ma'am."

"Well," the housekeeper replied impartially, "that's

as may be, Bowles. And she carries her head well, meek as she is—and meek she is to all appearing. I'm sure I don't know what to think. And it's my belief as the Captain's puzzled too, he was that short with her at the door. He asked me straight how long I had known she was coming, and black he looked when I said that she had written herself, and said it was by Lady Elisabeth's direction."

"I suppose the old lady did engage her?"

"And little it will help her! Why, if that be all it will set my lady against her as never was. The old lady has always taken my lord's side, and would put her hand in the fire for him. If all be true one hears, she was a gay piece herself in her day and not over particular."

Bowles nodded. "And what do you think, Mrs. Jemmett, ma'am, her ladyship will do?"

"Ah!" and the housekeeper gave the word its full weight, "I wish I knew, Bowles. She may pack her off with a flea in her ear—and that's most likely I'm thinking. And again—she mayn't. Her ladyship is that proud."

"Have you written to the Square?"

"No, and I'm not going to."

"Perhaps that'd be safest."

"Safest and best. You may spit on your fingers but red-hot is red-hot and best left alone. But whether her ladyship takes it rough or not, the girl will not be here long. Lady Ann will see to that. She's a monkey for tricks and a terror in her tantrums—and that's most times!"

"Spoiled, ma'am."

"You never said a truer word, and her mother's to thank for it. I don't know that anyone can manage her if it's not the Captain."

"Mr. Girardot?"

"Ay, man, when he goes her way. But that's all, only he's clever enough to hide it, and so my lady

thinks the world of him. I've an eye and he's glass to me. He don't take me in with his fine words and his curly hair. But mark me, whether this is one of my lord's little games or no, I'm no true prophet if miss is here this day fortnight. My lady puts up with a lot as I wouldn't stand, but if she puts up with this I'm mistaken."

Meanwhile Rachel, little suspecting the interest that she was arousing, was arranging her scanty possessions. She found a few dog's-eared lesson-books in a corner, and had soon made herself familiar with the involved hieroglyphics which she took to stand for Ann Dunstan. What she had heard of her charge would have alarmed her more seriously if she had not decided that it was Captain Dunstan's design to frighten her, and if she had not made up her mind not to be frightened. Her spirits, rebounding from the depression of the previous day, soared high ; she had no immediate trial to fear, and she carolled as she moved to and fro, setting things in order with the neatness that was a habit. No one came near her, silence reigned in that secluded wing, she was free to try on her caps and even the white muslin if she pleased. It was a blessed reprieve, and for the time she asked for nothing better.

From her bedroom window, which looked to the front, she saw the Captain return, gun on shoulder, a keeper attending him ; and for a moment she had a spasm of alarm, thinking that he might send for her and repeat his hateful advice. But nothing happened and she sat down to write to her mother, her relief and satisfaction finding place in her letter. All that she described, the housekeeper's kindness, the house, the forest, wore rose-colour ; and to do her justice they had been almost as warmly painted had the reality proved worse. She said little of Captain Dunstan—he had happened on her in a fortunate moment and saved her the cost of posting—a typical seaman, she added. rather brusque and rough. It was all read at

the breakfast-table at the cottage two days later, and laughed over and cried over and read again and again.

"Thank God," Mrs. South sighed, "she is safely there and I do think comfortable. I only hope her ladyship will be satisfied with her."

"Oh, she's sure to be. But I wish she'd said more about the Captain. What fun she must have had with him. I'm sure he'd think her pretty."

"My dear Ruth, I wish you would not be so foolish. If Rachel were as feather-headed as you, I should not have a moment's peace."

CHAPTER V

A VERY PLEASANT HELP

ON a morning some three days later, Rachel was busy in the schoolroom. The first newness of the position had worn off, for nearly a week she had seen and spoken to none but servants, and she was beginning to feel home-sick. There is a dullness, mild sister to suspense, that at once desires and dreads a change; and she was suffering from this when she heard the baize door, which squeaked on its hinges, give its signal. The door was her boundary, whoever passed it must have business with her, and she looked up, startled. She heard the thud as it closed, an impetuous step stalked down the passage, a hand knocked smartly. She was mustering courage to say 'Come in!' when, without waiting for her bidding, a young man, whose black garb set off his slender shape, appeared on the threshold. He paused a moment, smiling and taking in the scene—the small figure seated at the table, the timid surprised face raised to his. Then with an exaggerated air he clapped his hat to his breast and bowed, as Rachel rose, curtsying.

"And how is the Queen of the Blue Stockings?" he said in a musical voice. "My charming ally in the service of the Muses? Of Clio! Of Melpomene! Of the divine Urania! The tamer of the wild filly of the Forest! Ah! Deep, I see, in study which I have interrupted! Engaged in—Lord, now, what is she engaged in?" And coolly, before Rachel, taken by

surprise, could interpose, he lifted from the table the paper on which she had been employed. "Ten o'clock," he read, his eyes dancing with fun, "French dictation—I only wish you may get her, ma'am, as early! Eleven o'clock. Geography and the use of the Globes—have a care there, I beg you, for Ann knows all of that that her uncle can teach her, and I shouldn't be surprised if she can take an observation and correct a reckoning as well as Urania herself! Twelve to twelve-thirty——"

"Oh, please, please!" Rachel cried, blushing to the roots of her hair, and, had she known it, presenting a very pretty picture of confusion. "It was not meant, sir,—indeed, it was not meant——"

"For vulgar eyes?" He raised it calmly out of her reach. "Heaven forbid that such should light upon it! Twelve to twelve-thirty, reading from Dr. Johnson and the use of the Dictionary—why, in heaven's name, ma'am, who is to turn over those monstrous quartos? Not those little hands, I swear! But there!" he continued with a sudden change to the most sympathetic gravity as Rachel stood gazing at him in an agony of shyness, "I let my spirits run away with me. I displease you. There, ma'am," laying down the paper, "you see I am all obedient. Yet I will wager," he declared, with a moderate return to his rallying manner, "that I have learned one thing about you. You have no brothers."

"No," she faltered.

"For if you had you would have made a fight for your paper. But you are no tomboy. No, I see you are not. And now," this with gravity—and the man's good looks were so astonishing that they dazzled the girl—"let me introduce myself. I am Mr. Girardot, and for a time, Miss South, it will be our lot to inhabit the same house, to share the same solitude, to tread the same backstairs, to meet the same troubles—troubles of which, believe me, ma'am, you have but a

faint notion as yet. It may be in the power of one of us to help the other. It follows that we should be acquainted, and to that end, may I," he bowed with a courteous gesture, " invite you to resume your chair of office ! You permit ? "

Poor Rachel had never in her life felt so uncertain of herself. She had had no experience of men, and to be thus addressed in a manner which she did not know whether to take for jest or earnest, covered her with a confusion of which she was the more painfully sensible as the gentleman was completely at his ease. Tongue-tied and conscious of her *gaucherie*, she sat down again.

Probably he saw that he had produced the effect that he desired, for again he changed his manner, and now he was all softness and humility. " You say nothing ? " he resumed. " I broke in on you with too little ceremony ! With too great precipitation ! You cannot forgive me ? But I own my fault. Where my interest is engaged I let my spirits, which are perhaps too little bridled, carry me beyond bounds. But not," he added with a charming smile, " I trust beyond forgiveness ? "

" You took me by surprise, sir," Rachel said with an effort.

" Still, you will pardon me, will you not ? "

" Oh, yes." She was still in a state of dreadful perplexity. She was sure, she was nearly sure that he was playing with her, and, whether that were so or no, the intrusion of the male element in a form so disturbing was the last thing for which she was prepared. She longed for him to go, but he showed no intention of going. He settled himself comfortably on the faded red cushion that covered the window seat, and she was distressingly conscious that the light fell on her face.

" You have had—but you cannot have had at your age—a long experience of teaching ? "

" I have had none."

"And you have not seen your pupil?"

"No."

"Then I am afraid that you are unaware of the difficulties of your task? Unconscious of the troubles before you? Ann is a monkey, ma'am, wilful, violent, untamed; in her worst fits malign, and at her best," his eyes twinkled as he piled phrase on phrase and saw her lengthening face, "a sackful of tricks! A very imp of the devil! Her mother, a sensible woman, but weak where she is in question, has spoiled her *à merveille.* Now, ma'am," he leant forward with interest. "I crave your confidence. I am anxious to know how you will deal with her."

"I shall do my best," Rachel replied.

"But how? How, dear lady? For that is the question. If you have not experience, still I am sure—I read it in your face—that you have already decided on your course; that you have that instinct, that flair that at once suggests a treatment."

"I must see her before I can decide," Rachel said. She had not only no answer ready, but she had a horrid suspicion that he was still playing on her inexperience.

"But how? How, ma'am?" he insisted, refusing to take her answer. "Will you reason with her? Or fondle her? Or whip her? But I see," as Rachel, now offended by his persistence, showed her feeling in her eyes, "you refuse to confide in me. You do not think me worthy of confidence. You feel that you can rely so confidently on your tact, your gentleness—I read it in your eyes—your powers, that you need no hints! That the aid of a friend, the willing aid, is of no importance, ma'am?"

"Oh, no, no!" Rachel cried, driven to the wall. "I shall be thankful for help, sir. I shall be thankful for any advice that you can give me."

"But I have pressed too much?" he retorted, drawing back with an injured air. Which, indeed, was exactly what Rachel, puzzled and perplexed, was

feeling. "I have extorted but an unwilling consent! You feel that you can stand alone, that those little hands are strong enough to deal with any trouble that awaits them? You are proud. Too proud, too self-reliant, ma'am, and I can believe it, to need assistance. Very good!" He made a show of rising. "I shall watch the result with interest. My goodwill you will have, though you will not confide in me."

He had all the air of an offended man, and Rachel, who was beginning to believe in his protestations, surrendered. "But, indeed, indeed," she said eagerly, "you misunderstand me, sir. You misunderstand me strangely. I have no experience, and—and if out of yours, sir, you can suggest anything helpful, I shall be greatly obliged."

But this was not enough for the odd man before her.

"You accept, but you accept unwillingly," he rejoined. "I say again, you are proud."

"I am nothing of the kind."

"Nay, I read it in your eyes. They are speaking eyes. They are clear as crystal and betray your thoughts. You are saying, 'This man domineers and I will not be domineered over.'"

But Rachel was not without perception. "Perhaps you read my mind by your own, sir," she said.

"What—wit? Wit as well as——" he bowed, his eyes laughing. "But I will not offend you by speaking too plainly. Then to the point, ma'am, which is—Ann? Well, let me tell you, somewhere in that impish child's heart is a streak of gold, and I have found that streak. I have been happy enough to tap that softer vein. Within limits I can influence Ann, I can even control her."

Rachel could believe it. Innocent as she was, she could believe that with his looks, his smile ,his eyes, he could influence anything of the female sort, even a girl of twelve years old. She looked at him expectant.

He seemed to be waiting for her to speak. "And, sir?" she said doubtfully.

"I am willing to use that—shall I say that influence?—in Miss South's favour. Always supposing," he conditioned, with a whimsical look, "that she is not proud. Of course, if you still feel that you can, if you prefer to stand alone—but there," laughing frankly, "I make no conditions. Only I hate proud people."

Rachel suffered a fresh attack of shyness. "I have nothing of which to be proud," she said. "And I am much obliged to you."

He rose. "Then I am forgiven for my persistence? I shall sometimes be welcome here? I shall find here," he repeated with feeling, "that welcome, that semblance of home which is to be found nowhere else in this great house?"

Rachel, her face warm, she could not tell why, murmured some words of thanks. He listened with attention, seemed to hear her with approbation. Then, turning to the window, he said something of the solitude of the house, of the life led in it, of the lack of society, congenial society, of the isolation of their common position. He had laid aside his ambiguous manner, he spoke with propriety—and with every word he rose in Rachel's opinion.

Presently, in a serious tone, "You know, I suppose that all is not well between Lord Ellingham and our dear lady? I break no confidence in telling you that. It is no secret and you must soon learn it. The faults in my opinion, but I may be partial, are on one side, the merits, the conspicuous merits on the other. Ah, you start—you think that I should not prepossess you? And perhaps you are right—I value your good opinion and must not risk it. In a house that is so divided, so distracted, a house in which you and I stand isolated, may I"—he held out his hand and as she nervously placed hers in it he bowed low

over it—" may I go with the feeling that I have made a new friend ? "

" You are very kind." She was at once moved and embarrassed.

" Kind ? " he rejoined sadly—and he seemed to be a different man from the one who had broken in upon her so turbulently. " Well, it is something. For alas, there is little kindness here. I thank you. I thank you. Until we meet again, count, ma'am, upon the best offices that I can do you." Then, turning abruptly when his hand was already on the door, " We are friends ? " he said, with a sweetness that it was impossible to resist. " I have not flattered myself ? I have not mistaken that ? "

" I trust we shall be," Rachel murmured.

" Thank God ! " he ejaculated. And with that he passed out and closed the door behind him. It was not the first time that he had made his exit with those words.

As he passed, a slender graceful figure, down the broad stairway, he smiled at his thoughts. " Dear little thing ! " he reflected. " It is cruel to tease her, but who could resist the temptation ? She is like a mountain pool, one moment all light and colour, the next a rippling shadow. That tremulous mouth, those limpid eyes, I must see more of them. I must see them brighten when I come and grow dull when I go ! But dear innocent, not to harm her ! No, no ! A slight *tendresse*—I owe that to myself, and it will educate her, and amuse me when my lady is not here."

Above stairs the squeak of the baize door had left Rachel at liberty to return to her time-table. But she was in no mood to return to it. Her cheeks were hot, her mind was in a whirl, she could not apply herself. She must be moving, be shutting this and opening that, be rising to her feet as soon as she had seated herself. And this restlessness ? It was all Lady Ann, she told herself ; Lady Ann and the sad account of her

pupil that she had heard, and the trying prospect that it presented. It was all Ann; how was she to deal with her? How manage her? It was a most trying, grave, important problem. No wonder that the consideration of it unsettled her.

But had she been frank with herself, she must have admitted that it was not the thing that had been told, it was the teller that disturbed her. It was the interview, so odd and vivid, the looks, the tones, the solicitude expressed and the friendship offered that left her unquiet; that quickened her pulses and troubled her senses, that compelled her to open the window and sweep back the ringlets that would fall over her face. It was the man. It was the impact with a new, ambiguous, perplexing force that drove her thoughts out of their placid channel and hurried them on in flood.

It had been so odd an interview. It had thrust upon her notice a character so novel—and almost any man at close quarters had been novel to Rachel! He had taken a kind of possession of her, had teased and puzzled and all but offended her. He had been at one time utterly unreasonable, and then in a moment he had shown himself so different, so kind, so gentle. He had at once tormented and soothed and flattered her!

She decided at last, when time and reflection had restored her self-possession, that men in this new world must be like that. That it was only her youth and inexperience that found him strange and that she must accustom herself. She must harden herself.

But one thing was certain, though she did not analyse its cause; and this was that the things about her, even the dull lesson-books and the ink-stained table, now wore another and a brighter aspect. The breath of young life, of the unexpected, of change and adventure, had moved on the face of them and enlivened them. As she gazed from the window and her eyes followed the cloud-shadows that travelled the glades

and the wind that in its passage bent the meek heads of the ferns, as she drank in with her ears the cooing of the ringdoves, she found a new beauty in the scene, a fairer radiance in the sunshine, a deeper note in the forest peace.

She was so thankful, so very thankful that in this strange place she had found a friend.

CHAPTER VI

IN TROUBLE

LADY ELLINGHAM was after all to return along with the children, and Rachel had seldom spent more unpleasant hours than those which on the Monday preceded their arrival. She had seen no more of the smiling tutor, and the spell that he had momentarily cast over her had lost some of its power; while the prospect that he had disclosed remained to daunt her, and to daunt her the more as it opened more nearly before her. She felt, as she watched the slow progress of the clock and found herself unable to apply her mind to anything, that she had never before known what suspense was.

To her shyness and inexperience it would have been no small ordeal to meet her employer and her pupil, had Lady Ann been an ordinary child. But after what she had heard of her stubborn temper and of Lady Ellingham's predilection for her, the plunge troubled the girl exceedingly. And she had to contemplate it in solitude. She had not even Mrs. Jemmett for company. From the time of Mr. Girardot's arrival the housekeeper had thought proper to serve the governess upstairs; and perhaps this was as well, for the house was in confusion below, the servants, their number mysteriously augmented, were everywhere, fires were lighting, beds were airing, and the grand suite that had not seen the light for weeks was being unshrouded. There were strange faces on the stairs and a new cook in the kitchen.

But all this, and the stir and bustle that penetrated by fits to the schoolroom, did but serve to accentuate Rachel's isolation, and to leave her at greater liberty to torment herself. She could not read, she could no more sew than fly. She passed restlessly between schoolroom and bedroom, and an hour before the earliest moment at which the travellers could appear had stationed herself at the window that looked to the front.

Of course they were late; and it seemed to her, searching the long avenue to catch the first floating feather, the first token of their approach, that they would never come. The sun sank until it gilded only the crests of the forest. The three drives sank into sombre shadow. The stable clock tolled seven. Then when she had for a few seconds averted her eyes, they came. A post-chaise led the way, an open travelling carriage with four horses and an outrider followed, a *fourgon* with servants and luggage brought up the rear. Rachel watched their oncoming with a sinking heart, and before even the post-chaise reached the house she got a startling intimation of what she might expect. Out of it leapt a big band-box, that bounded and rolled across the sward. A second band-box followed, then a parcel which, amid shrieks of childish laughter, burst open as it fell. Still the post-chaise rolled on, swept round to the entrance, drew up.

Out of it tumbled a boy and after him a girl, a tumult of scarlet cloth and floating black hair. She fell upon the boy, pummelling him with one hand, while with the other she beat him about the head with a velvet jockey-cap. The boy, shielding his head with his arms, fled whooping into the house, the girl followed, while the chaise, moving on towards the stables, gave Rachel a glimpse of two scandalized women.

The sight was not reassuring. But the Countess was still to come. Rachel watched the travelling carriage draw up, and watched the servants gather about it.

She saw Lady Ellingham alight—a dark, handsome woman, still and pale, in a drab travelling cloak with green facings and a black bonnet with a single green feather. She had a dog in her arms, but Rachel stayed to see no more. As the carriage drew on, she took a last glance at the mirror, saw that her cap was straight and her hair smooth, and stole back to the schoolroom. She did not know whether the unruly children or the stately mother alarmed her the more.

She had barely seated herself at the table, with some dim notion of being found at her post, when the squeak of the baize door, followed by a rush of noisy feet and riotous voices, prepared her for the worst. The schoolroom door was flung wide and the children burst in, the boy leading. He saw Rachel and stood transfixed and staring, heedless of the blows that the girl continued to rain upon him.

"By gum!" he said.

The girl dropped her hands, tossed her black mane from her flushed face and stared—stared, and insolently. "Who are you?" she cried.

Rachel rose, outwardly composed. "You are Lady Ann?" she said.

"Golly, George, I know," the girl exclaimed. "She's the new sewing-maid. Here, you," she continued, addressing Rachel rudely, "you've no business here, impudence! Get out, do you hear?"

"This is the schoolroom," the boy explained more gently.

Rachel gathered her forces. "Yes," she said calmly. "I know. I am not the new sewing-maid. I am your new governess, Lady Ann."

The girl scowled. "You are what?" she cried with violence.

"Your new governess."

"By gum!" the boy exclaimed again. And whistling shrilly, he stared his hardest.

But—the girl stamped her foot on the floor. "It's

a lie ! " she retorted. She was all black ; black angry eyes, black brows, a torrent of black hair. She was cast in a large mould and tall for her years. " You're a devil ! A devil ! And you'll have to get out of this, and quick too ! This is my room ! "

Rachel ignored her. She looked at the boy. " You are Lord Bodmin ? "

" Don't answer her ! " the girl ordered. But he nodded.

" Perhaps you will be good enough to tell her ladyship when you see her that I am here—Miss South—and will wait upon her when she desires to see me."

But Ann was furious, was perhaps alarmed—she wanted no governess. " You'll go out ! " she persisted.

" No," Rachel said firmly.

The girl was about to retort when the boy seized her and dragged her away. " Oh, rats ! " he said. " Come along, sis ! Let's go and rout out old Girry ! And we are to have supper with mother."

" It's some dirty trick ! " Ann stormed. She flung a last " You devil ! " at Rachel and made a hideous face, but allowed herself to be hauled away. That, however, was not the last of them. The door had scarcely slammed behind them when it was flung open and the velvet cap flew into the room. It went wide of Rachel and broke the glass of a picture.

" Oh ! " Rachel cried. Her knees were shaking under her and she had much ado not to burst into tears. " What a child ! What a pupil ! How can I ever manage her ? And why, why did I come ? "

And for a while she gave way, her elbows on the table, her face hidden in her hands. Her loneliness and the child's cruel lack of feeling overcame her. But her tears were almost as much the offspring of anger as of pain, and anger dried them quickly.

Which was well, for she had not been alone ten minutes before she heard the baize door open, a measured step trod the passage and a perfunctory knock

heralded Mrs. Jemmett. "You are to go to her ladyship, if you please, miss," she said.

"At once?"

"Yes, miss, if you please." The woman's face was grave, and had Rachel looked closely at her she might have read compassion in her eyes.

"Very well." But conscious of her tear-stained face, "I will just smooth my hair," she added. "Where is her ladyship?"

"I am to take you down, miss." And the housekeeper waited while the girl, crossing hastily to her bedroom, sponged away the tell-tale traces. They went down the grand staircase in silence, Rachel gathering her forces.

Bowles was standing at the door of the Countess's sitting-room. He opened it and Rachel, quaking but resolved, went in.

It was clear that Lady Ellingham had lost no time in interviewing her, for although an Argand lamp shed a soft glow on the table on which it stood, the gold-fringed curtains had not been drawn and through the tall windows the trees showed dark masses against a pale sky. Rachel was aware of this, and later remembered it. But at the moment she saw only the woman in whose hands her fate lay, and whose hostility the very air of the room betrayed to her. She recognized that Lady Ellingham was strikingly beautiful, tall, erect, dark—and incredibly cold. Pride could not have harboured in a fairer form, and as with eyes a little narrowed she gazed at the girl, pride seemed to emanate from her.

And yet—and yet Rachel fancied that she perceived ever so slight a change in that searching gaze; as if my lady had prepared herself for something and did not see precisely what she had expected to see. She stayed the girl by a gesture before she had advanced more than a pace into the room. "Be good enough," she said, "to tell me your name."

Astonished, Rachel steadied her voice and told her.

"Who sent you here?" The question came sharp and uncompromising.

Still more amazed and stammering a little, "Lady Elisabeth Dunstan," Rachel answered.

"How did you know her?" There was suspicion as well as hostility in the tone.

"I was named to her by the Dean of Exeter."

For a moment Lady Ellingham seemed in her turn to be a little surprised. "You live near Exeter?"

"Yes, with my mother." Rachel was quick-witted, and though she was far from guessing all that was in my lady's mind—or her face would have burned indeed—she was beginning to understand why she had been summoned in such haste.

"Have you met any other members of the family—besides Lady Elisabeth?" The Countess's gaze narrowed as she put the question.

"Only Captain Dunstan, whom I met by accident at Salisbury."

"You have met no others of the family?" my lady persisted. "Not—not Lord Ellingham, or—or—you are sure?"

"No, no one," Rachel repeated steadfastly. She was beginning to breathe again, though she knew now that there was trouble before her—dreadful, dreadful trouble.

"And you say that Lady Elisabeth engaged you?"

"She did—most clearly." The girl was determined that there should be no doubt about that. She saw the importance of it.

A pause. "You have had then, of course—what experience have you had—of teaching?"

Rachel winced. "None," she faltered.

Lady Ellingham's eyebrows went up. "You should not have undertaken such a position," she said severely, "without more information. Have you seen Lady Ann? Do you think you can control her or manage her?

You ? " There crept into her ladyship's tone, and for the first time, a note of the human. " Why, you are a little thing. How old are you ? "

" Nineteen," Rachel confessed with a tragic face. She already foresaw the end of the interview—saw herself dismissed, disbanded, packed home with ignominy.

" You don't look it ! You look a mere child ! I suppose you have never been out of Devonshire before ? "

" No, ma'am."

" And are a clergyman's daughter, you say ? "

" I am."

The Countess stared, but not as she had stared. There was more surprise and less suspicion in her eyes. She looked uncertain and perplexed. That without her leave or knowledge, without a single communication made to her, this girl should have been foisted on her household by that impertinent, interfering old woman —with or without the consent of her husband—was in itself enough to wound her pride to the quick. But if only that were all : if only that darker suspicion that she had for a few humiliating moments entertained—nay, that she had read in the faces about her—were groundless ? Certainly the girl did not look the part. Those timid eyes, that appealing mouth, surely, surely they could not deceive to that point. And he, with all his faithlessness, had never yet stooped to that. She knew enough ill of him, God knew ; but nothing so vile, so shameful, so unforgivable as that ! And, in a sharp revulsion of feeling, the Countess not only put the suspicion from her—for the time—but felt herself degraded by it, and angry, furiously angry with those whose mysterious looks had supported if they had not imparted it. Thank God, in this at least she had wronged him !

But the girl remained, and what was she to do with her ? To dismiss her offhand, as she had intended, would be to give colour to that hateful thought, if

others did entertain it. And the child, ill at ease, though she hid her tremors, appealed to her. After a long silence, "You had better know the truth," she said, and she still spoke coldly, for it was her habit. "Lady Elisabeth had no authority to engage you. I knew nothing of your coming until I heard that you were in the house. And I do not think that you have either the experience or the qualifications needed for the post. I am quite sure that it will be the wisest course to close the matter at once."

The tears rose to Rachel's eyes. All the difficulties, all the troubles that she had foreseen faded into nothingness beside this—this ignominious termination. "I am to go?" she said, her lips quivering.

Lady Ellingham hesitated, for under that cold demeanour, behind the armour of pride which she had assumed in self-defence, there beat a heart. It troubled her now. "Have you seen Lady Ann?" she asked.

"Yes."

"Do you think it possible that you can manage her?"

"I can try—I should like to try," the girl said, and her eyes pleaded for her.

"Well, I will consider. It is quite true that I proposed to find a governess for her this autumn. She has run wild long enough. But, frankly, Miss South, you are not of the stamp I should have chosen. However—I will consider whether I shall give you a trial, and I will let you know my decision in the morning. Good evening. You can go now."

Her manner belied her words, for it held out less hope than she intended, and Rachel went back to the schoolroom in the lowest spirits; and, shocked by the sudden discovery of her false position, and faced by alternatives neither of which was of a kind to soothe, she slept, we may be sure, little that night. At one moment—but that was in the cold grey of the dawn when her courage ran low—she inclined to think dismissal the

lesser evil. But for the most part she leaned to, she clung to the hope of remaining. The worst ordeal, even that which awaited her in the schoolroom, seemed preferable to a termination so premature and so humiliating, to a collapse of all her plans and prospects. She pictured her mother's disappointment, she recalled the comfortable letter that she had written home. And bravely she determined to make a fight for it, were the chance given her.

She judged that if she was to go, if my lady's thumb turned downwards, she would be sent for early in the day; and from the moment that she sat down to her hasty breakfast she was in a flutter of spirits, expecting the summons and rising at every sound that reached her. She rehearsed with passion the appeal that she would make to Lady Ellingham; again she saw herself telling the tale to her mother. So time wore on—slowly, it need not be said. It struck eleven, and her hopes rose with the delay. But, as nothing here is perfect, with her hopes her fears rose also. Lady Ann, now that it seemed to be possible that she would be entrusted with her, grew more terrible; the schoolroom took on the aspect of an arena in which she foresaw a shameful defeat, and—and then she heard a step approaching.

She expected a servant bearing a message, but it was Mr. Girardot who entered. He paused on the threshold, and his looks, at once solicitous and subdued, seemed to deprecate her anger. "If I thought, ma'am," he said gravely, "that my news was welcome I should bear a lighter heart. But I do not know how your wishes run."

"I cannot say," Rachel replied, trembling, "until I know what Lady Ellingham's decision is."

"She—and, believe me, it is no small victory—desires that you will remain—on trial."

The blood rushed to Rachel's face. "Oh!" she exclaimed. The die was cast, then.

He let himself go. "I see," he said, "that I was not mistaken in you. I was not wrong. You have more courage than caution—more spirit than prudence. If you were a man you would not count heads. You are not to be lightly browbeaten!"

For the moment Rachel felt only relief, and she smiled. "Courage may be rashness," she said. "I know only too well now"—her face growing grave again—"that the task was not meant for me and how ill-equipped I am for it. But you would not have me withdraw, sir? You would not have me," she asked anxiously, "refuse to stay?"

"I would not advise you," he cried earnestly, "to any course that your own good sense and your will do not dictate to you. Heaven forbid! I know no better censors of any situation. I can fancy you equal to any decision!"

She sighed and stood a moment reflecting, while he, watching her with growing interest, decided that no face that he had ever seen was so transparent a tale-teller. She really was, in her mingled weakness and strength, a dear little person.

"But I must see Lady Ellingham," she said at last, rousing herself, "before I can decide."

He put the suggestion aside. "There is no need," he said. "I have full authority. Surely you do not doubt me?"

She coloured. "No, of course not, sir. Still, I must see her."

"Ah!" In a moment his tone changed to one of injury, and his eyes sparkled. "I see how it is, ma'am. You are above dealing through me. You think I am not a fitting intermediary. You must see—oh yes, of course you must see Lady Ellingham herself! Nothing else will serve you. And yet," he went on in a softer tone, "I have been an intermediary. I may have ventured to advise, to suggest, even to entreat. I may have pointed out things not to your

disadvantage. But I see," and his nostrils quivered, "I am not trusted, ma'am. I am to be nothing in this!"

"But indeed, indeed," Rachel cried in great distress, "I did not mean that. I am sure that you have been my friend, sir—that you have spoken for me. And doubtless——"

"But I am not trusted!" He seemed to be on the point of leaving her in anger.

"Please, please listen to me," she said, clasping her hands. "It is not, indeed, it is not what you think. I am grateful, most grateful to you. Nevertheless, I must see Lady Ellingham. I must have—you must see that I must have—her support with Lady Ann. It is essential, it is necessary. Without that I should not be justified in staying."

"And my influence with Lady Ann," he said gloomily, "is for nothing?"

She plucked up a spirit. "You know that it is not," she said. Surely, surely, he was unreasonable. "But I know," she continued, with an appealing look which was what he had been playing for, "that I can count upon it. I know that I have a friend in you."

His face cleared as by magic. "That is all I ask," he said. "But," he went on with a charming smile, "I know now what a proud, what an independent, what a prickly little spirit it is! I know you. Yes, ma'am, I know you."

"And I may see Lady Ellingham?"

"She is in the garden." And without another word he turned away, leaving her, puzzled and disturbed, to review what had passed, to recall his looks, to smile at his unreasonableness, to be grateful for his aid.

The main fact that she was to stay was decided, then. For the interview in the garden, it may be very briefly described as it was seen by the eyes of Mr. Crosstrees, the head gardener. He told his story sitting on the edge of a chair in Mrs. Jemmett's room, and

drinking a tankard of old ale, tapped and drawn under Bowles's own eye.

"Well, ma'am, 'twas a chance," he said. "'Twasn't my place to be there, and how I come to see them, I was showing the new lad to use a spade, which he works with his hand instead of his foot, and being unaccustomed I'd straightened my back. But there! What I saw was not worth seeing—just my lady and a poor little piece, standing before her as meek as a toad, and all the say my lady's till just at the end."

Mrs. Jemmett gazed at the blindworm. If only she had been there! "Was her ladyship pleasant like?"

"Oh ay, oh ay, pleasant enough with a frost on it! Sort o' March sun and wind, if you understand, Mr. Bowles. As it might be the north side of a fence. Talking kind of slow, and her chin tilted."

"Not scolding?"

"Oh, nothing so low. Not demeanin' herself. And by-'n'-by the little thing plucked up courage and sàid her bit, brave like for such as her, and my lady seemed to consider, and presently she called the young ladyship, and up her comes, black and sulky-like and kicking up behind. And my lady puts a hand on her shoulder and speaks a bit, her fidgeting and fermenting. Then, "You need not begin work till Monday," says her ladyship, and nods her head, as much as to say 'You may go,' and the young person curtsies—very pretty, I will say. And—and that's all there was to it, ma'am."

Crosstrees drank up his ale, and, when he was gone, Bowles pronounced his opinion. "'Twas the tutor did it," he said.

"Ay, to be sure. Now I wonder why, Bowles?"

"Well, if you ask me, it's a dull place, ma'am. And Mr. G.'s one to amuse himself."

"I should have thought he'd enough of that to his hand," Mrs. Jemmett said darkly. "I sometimes think if I were his lordship I should have a word to say to it."

Bowles looked at the door. These were great lengths, singular indiscretions. But the dumbness of Crosstrees provoked to candour, and the butler was too gallant a man to leave Mrs. Jemmett at a disadvantage. "There you'd be wrong, Mrs. J.," he said. "My lord's touched too much pitch not to know it when he sees it—and likewise not to know where no pitch there is. And gentlemen amuse themselves, ma'am, in more ways than one. There's a way tickles their vanity, and no harm done."

"Well, that's not my lord's way," the housekeeper said with decision.

Bowles chuckled. "I'd be very sorry to say it was. And then again there's another way——"

But Mrs. Jemmett's modesty took fright. "You know too much, my man," she said. "Not in this room, if you please!"

CHAPTER VII

GAINING A FOOTING

RACHEL had won the cause, but she had still to pay the costs, she had still to make good her footing in the schoolroom. She had Ann on her mind, and heavy on her mind, and a Black Monday in prospect; and she had less faith in Lady Ellingham's support than she could wish. She longed for the trial of strength to be over, and much would it have surprised her had she been told that within forty-eight hours she would be feeling, if not reconciled to her lot, at any rate in a mood to snatch a passing enjoyment and to think it possible that she might find pleasure in her new life.

Yet so it was, and the change came about very simply. Towards three on the next afternoon the boy blundered in on her solitude. "I'm to ask," he blurted out, bashfully kicking one foot against the other, "if you'd care to come with us to the Stag's Hole? We're to boil the kettle there. Mr. Girardot is coming."

Rachel guessed to whom she owed the attention. But she saw that here was a chance, more gracious than the schoolroom afforded, of coming to terms with her pupil, and she gladly embraced the invitation.

"Then in twenty minutes!" the boy cried, and whooped himself away.

So half an hour later she found herself marching into the forest with the tutor and the two children, the latter riding a pony by turns and squabbling much over it. The treat was unexpected, the scene was new to her,

the sun shone, the woodland depths invited; and presently she was surprised to find herself at her ease. "In the season," the tutor explained, "we do this once a week. Sometimes Lady Ellingham comes. She loves a *fête-champêtre*, and the simpler it is the more it is to her taste. Oh, you are not so much to be pitied, ma'am, as you think! In twelve months I predict——"

"If I am here," she said.

"No, no! No Jeremiads to-day, if you please!" he cried gaily. "I repeat that twelve months hence you will know every turn of this path and love it. You will be tied to the forest by every tendril of a heart that I am sure is open to the influence of beauty and solitude! You will mark with a white stone many a bank and resting-place now strange to you, and harbour memories and tender memories of more than one. I see it! I know it! You will be a forest lover, ma'am!" He flourished the basket that he carried.

Rachel shook her head. "I am not so sanguine," she said, and she would fain have been insensible to the thrill that his words and his tone awoke in her. But how could she resist the charm of the woodland that took her to its bosom, of the stately oaks, their feet clothed in bracken, or the dark beech-wood, so silent that the fall of the mast surprised the ear and the flight of a wood-dove startled the nerves? Of the green feathery bottom where a runlet tinkled unseen, and again sparkled in the sunshine? Or, if she were proof against these and against the holiday spirit that won insensibly upon her, how was she to resist the tones that caressed her, that hinted interest, that avowed goodwill, that claimed to share alike her confidence and her fears? Rachel had been more than woman if she had not in some degree succumbed to the charm, even though Ann's black brows and repellent glances cried a warning.

"You are not so sanguine?" he said, after a pause

given, it seemed, to reflection. "Why? But it is idle to ask. I know. You do not deceive me. Lady Ellingham's manner has chilled you. But what of it? She is Lady Ellingham, we are we, we bear the badge of servitude that Swift bore. Then let it unite us. We are of a kind, we owe one another what sympathy, what aid, what comfort is in our power. Yesterday, I am proud to avow it, I did and said what lay in my way. And you are here, and are not—do not say that you are—unhappy to be here? Good! Then to-morrow it may lie with you to do the same kind office for me, and I know you too well—oh, I know you, I understand you. I have measured your loyal soul too exactly not to be sure that you in your turn——"

But here the children broke in, claiming an arbiter, protesting, appealing, wrangling. They fell to beating one another, and the fray was only closed by Girardot's seizing the girl, mastering her and dragging her on, half reluctant, half willing, her arm prisoned in his. Possibly he was not sorry to give the governess a proof of his power, where she felt herself so impotent; for he proceeded to tease Ann, to provoke and subdue the child by turns. And Rachel, who had shrunk from interposing, feeling herself unequal to the task, was not critical enough to discern that his authority was limited by the child's humour, and went no farther than flattered her. Ann, too, was showing off.

In a dingle with steep wooded sides and on a grassy plat, half encircled by a brook rippling clear and sharp over brown pebbles, they piled their wood beside a fallen trunk, lit it delicately with flint and steel and dry tinder, and set their kettle to boil. The children helped or hindered or strayed down the rivulet, turning stones for loaches. To Rachel the scene brought a sense of relief, of peace unexpected and unlooked for. The ease and freedom of the meal beside the stream pleased, and the boy made shy advances to her. But her main difficulty remained, for she perceived that

but for the tutor's watchful attentions, and his care to include her, she would have had but cold entertainment; and that Ann at any rate would have sent her to Coventry. Was it wonderful if she felt, and if now and again a shy glance betrayed, her gratitude? If, as they loitered homewards through an evening stillness inviting to reverie, or if, once more alone in her schoolroom, life seemed to take on a warmer hue?

And if rising in the morning she felt in place of dread the tingle of anticipation and conjectured in the coming day possibilities that she did not stay to analyse? No odd moment at which he might not appear! Now with a gentle "I ventured to bring you—but I see I am interrupting you," now with a brisker "Ha! ha! I see we wear our stand-off air to-day! We are proud, we are not to be trespassed on!" He brought her franks and she might now write to the Cottage without thought of the cost. And by and by he brought her a more startling surprise. He, or curiosity, or possibly ennui—but Rachel gave him the credit. For early in the afternoon two days later who should appear to break in on the governess's solitude but my lady.

She nodded negligently to Rachel, who rose and curtsied as became her. The Countess walked with studied calmness to the window and gazed out. "You look to this side?" she said. "It is not the brighter side. Have you," she went on, evidently for the sake of saying something, "all the books you need? All that you want?" And when Rachel explained that she had made a list, "Very good, Miss South, let Mr. Girardot have it. He will see to it."

The girl, fingering her pen, continued to stand. "Pray go on with what you are doing," the Countess said, graciously inclining her head; and she turned to inspect the old foxed prints that adorned the wall. A tarnished mirror hung among them. Before this she lingered, and had Rachel been at her ease, the girl

would have seen that she was herself the real object under inspection—a cold inspection that omitted no detail of face or figure. Presently, to Rachel's relief—for she found the silence both trying and ambiguous—her visitor moved towards the table. "You find the change excessive?" she said more gently.

"I have been used to a quiet life, ma'am."

"And you are content?"

"I shall be more than content if—if I am successful with my pupil."

"And that is your only anxiety?"

"I think so."

Lady Ellingham nodded. She turned again to the door. "Well, I hope that Ann will take to you. Perhaps not at once, but——"

The thud of a closing door stayed the words. A quick step outside, a hasty knock and the tutor entered, his face radiant. He clapped his hands. "Caught on the place, dear lady!" he cried. "The penalty is old, known, established! And Miss South will join with me, I am sure, in enforcing it, and humbly crave the honour of your presence at the schoolroom tea."

But Lady Ellingham's manner made it plain that she was not prepared for this. "Not to-day, Mr. Girardot," she said soberly.

The words went by him as if she had not spoken. "The tea," he announced with an exaggerated bow, "is even now mounting the stairs."

"No," my lady repeated, and this time more coldly. "Not to-day, if you please." She signed to him to open the door.

Rachel thought that that was the end of the matter, and felt that she was the obstacle. But she did not yet know the tutor, much less did she expect to hear her thought put into words. Instead of giving place, he stepped forward and with a smiling face he set his back to the door. "No, ma'am, not so!" he said. "I cannot let you, I cannot suffer you to belie your

kind heart. You have not considered, I know that you have not considered that to refuse to do this to-day —to refuse to grant a favour that you have so often granted before, is to——"

"Really, Mr. Girardot," the Countess broke in, colouring with annoyance, "I do not understand what you mean."

"You do not know that to refuse to-day is to"—he dropped his voice to a tone of confidence—"is to hurt the sensibilities of one who still feels herself a little homeless, a little strange, ma'am? Ah, no, I know you too well. I know that you have not considered that, or——"

"You are too absurd!" Lady Ellingham cried warmly. "You must let me pass, if you please!"

But he still persisted. "No!" he said, and to Rachel's surprise, who watched the scene with profound astonishment, he held the door, though my lady put her hand on it. "No, I appeal to the kindness of your heart! I know you, ma'am, to be generous, amiable, that you would not hurt a fly! And that rather than hurt one who—but here come more powerful intercessors! They may succeed where I fail!"

And with a submissive gesture he opened the door and admitted the children. They flung themselves upon their mother with cries of glee. "You will stay, mother, won't you?" they pleaded. "You will stay? Mr. Girardot promised us that you would!"

"I think Mr. Girardot," the Countess said, with a reproachful glance, "takes too much upon himself. I am to have no will of my own, it seems! Still, as you——"

"You will, won't you? Say yes!" they cried, hugging her.

She gave way. "I suppose I must," she said.

"Children," he cried briskly, "clear the table! Room, room for the Sunday pound cake! It comes! It comes!"

And within three minutes Rachel, dumbfounded by the audacity of this strange man, found herself seated at the table with the great lady. She found that she was expected to preside and to pour out—with nervous hands and a flushed face. Fortunately the jests and horse-play of the children, who never rested in their seats for a moment, robbed the meal of formality, and though Lady Ellingham rarely addressed her, and might almost have been suspected of shyness, and Lady Ann turned a cold and repelling shoulder, the ice was broken and a step, a perceptible step, was gained. The once dull room rang with shrieks and laughter, and if she was not of it, she sat amidst it—admiring.

And when, left again to herself, she was free to think of what had passed, of what did she think ? Inevitably of the actor who had played so strange a rôle in the scene and dominated it—of his audacity, his mastery, his cleverness. Equally impossible was it for her not to reflect with a thrill of gratitude on the purpose to which he had devoted his powers. To helping her, lonely and insignificant as she was, to winning a footing for her, to making things a little easier for her !

And—and to think in such a case, to think long and gratefully was coming near to—but Rachel was not as yet awake to that. If she was tending in a certain direction she did not perceive whither she was tending ; nor understand why, when she was again alone, she sat for minutes, lost in a pleasant dream, why the future seemed to be more full of interest, of life, of possibilities, than it had seemed an hour or two before. She had come to Queen's Folly vowed to a cloistered life, into which certain things did not enter, or at any rate were not supposed to enter ; and she did not yet discern that even a governess's close bonnet is not proof against nature, an elf that has a way of stealing in by the keyhole, be the door ever so strongly barred.

But she suspected where credit was due when Black

Monday arrived, and the dreaded hour of ten came, and passed without open disaster. Lady Ann came sulkily in, sat lumpily down at the table, and scowled at her governess from under black brows, that said as plainly as if she had spoken, "I shan't learn from you!" But she did not openly rebel, did not put out her tongue at her teacher, was not utterly dumb when addressed. Rachel felt, indeed, as if she were dealing with a barrel of gunpowder, and every question that she put were a spark. But she hid her fears, like the gallant little soul that she was, did nine-tenths of the work herself, and turned a blind eye to shrugs and grimaces. She looked to use and wont to help her, hoped by sheer gentleness to appeal to the good that was in the child —if good there was—and in the meantime she was content to get through the morning without an outburst.

Somewhat emboldened, she ventured on the morrow to set a French copy, and Ann showed herself unexpectedly compliant. She produced a packet of quills dyed all the colours of the rainbow and enclosed in a fancy box, and choosing one, fell pretty willingly to work, her pleasure in the gaudy pen reconciling her, as it seemed, to the task.

So for some days things went tolerably, Rachel doing the greater part of the work and her pupil lolling and fidgeting. But on the Friday Ann came to the schoolroom in a black mood. It was a fine morning, the sun shone gaily, the air laden with the scents of the forest came in at the window, and the child rebelled. "I shan't work to-day!" she said, scowling, and refusing to take her seat. "So there!"

"Nonsense, Ann!" Rachel replied briskly. "You will have the afternoon for play."

"It will rain. Bowles says it will."

"Well, we must take our chance of that."

Ann lumped herself heavily on her chair. "I shan't work, anyway," she persisted.

Rachel summoned all her firmness though her heart beat unpleasantly. "You must not say that," she said. "You will have a holiday to-morrow, and if you do not work to-day——"

"What'll you do?" the child asked defiantly.

"There will be no tea at the Stag's Brook to-morrow," Rachel decided. She felt that she could no longer capitulate.

"Oh, there won't, won't there!" Ann cried, and bounced up from her seat. "I'll see about that, you horrid thing! You white-faced thing!" And before Rachel could interpose the child had flung out of the room.

Rachel stood and looked at the door in dismay. What could she do with such a pupil? So wilful, so stubborn, so rude? She could only go to Lady Ellingham and ask for support, and she felt that to resort to her at this early stage was to own defeat, and to confess that she was unequal to the task. She could have cried. But there seemed to be nothing else for it, and with a sinking heart she was preparing to seek the Countess when she heard lagging steps returning. Ann sneaked in with a gloomy face, rubbing one leg against the other. She left the door open, and dumped herself down in her seat.

"Be good enough to close the door!" Rachel said in her coldest tone.

To her surprise, the child obeyed.

"I am glad," Rachel continued, looking at her with all the severity that she could assume, "that you have thought better of it, Lady Ann. I should certainly have kept my word."

"I don't care," sullenly. "I don't care whether we go to Stag's Brook or no! But I—I promised him when he gave me the pens—that's all!"

"Well, I am glad that you have one virtue—you keep your word. So it was the pens, was it?" Rachel went on in a cutting tone, but she felt her face flame.

"Then you had better take that one out of your mouth and begin your French dictation. But understand, Ann, that it is a matter of no moment to me whether you like me or not. I may not like you; but it is my duty to teach you, and I intend to do so. Now we will begin."

And it really seemed as if her words made some impression. Ann scowled, indeed, as if she could kill her governess, but she took the pen out of her mouth and wrote.

So that was the secret of the quills! They were his present. He had foreseen, planned, schemed, and secured at least a beginning for her. Rachel's face was still warm. Ann could no longer have called her a white-faced thing. Her face was warm but her heart also swelled—with gratitude.

CHAPTER VIII

DURING those first weeks nothing struck Rachel more than the stately loneliness in which they lived. She had pictured the splendour and bustle of a great establishment, the coming and going of guests, the hum of carriages, music, laughter, the swish of silken trains on polished floors. But the long reception rooms at Queen's Folly lay day after day silent in sunshine, or faded into November gloom. The only train that swept them was my lady's as, proud and still, she sought the gardens, or of an afternoon passed out through bowing servants to her solitary drive with her four horses and her outrider. At long intervals a visitor appeared and now and again the children broke loose from their guardians, wrangled and clattered across the hall, slid shrieking down the broad balusters.

There were reasons why Queen's Folly saw little company. It was Lady Ellingham's pleasure. But to some extent it was the same with many great houses in that day. Travelling was fatiguing as well as costly, and guests, when they came, came in large parties and stayed for long periods. Between times, the Squire and his lady sat down day after day with some led captain or chaplain, who was cunning in wine and patient of old stories; or with some mature spinster, who of mornings grounded the lady's tambour-work and nursed her Raton.

Towards the end of November, however, Rachel, now pretty well established, felt a little stir in the house.

She came on maids in strange places and saw doors ajar that were usually closed. And, "Uncle George is coming," Ann announced, sucking her pen defiantly. "I shan't work while he is here."

"He's bringing me a gun!" her brother bragged. "I'm to shoot with him. I shall shoot all day."

"It's only a boy's gun," the girl cried jealously. "It's not a real gun, silly."

"It is!"

"It isn't!"

"You're a liar!" On which battle was joined and the fight rolled tumultuously out of the room, a whirl of arms and legs and shrill abuse. Rachel stopped her ears.

The news was nothing to her. The memory of Captain Dunstan was far from pleasant—a rude brusque man who had regarded her feelings no more than if she had been a kitchen-maid. But in the housekeeper's room, where a little break in the monotony was welcome, it provided a text on which Mrs. Jemmett had something to say.

"Now we shall see," the housekeeper commented, her face thoughtful. "The Captain has eyes as well as us. And it's my thinking he'll not like what he sees."

"You're suspicious, suspicious, ma'am," Bowles retorted. "Do you think as I've stood twice a day behind her ladyship's chair and not know her?"

"Now, Bowles, did I say a word against her ladyship? Not that she's not a woman after all, and water wears away a stone. And some excuse in her case, poor lady, and I'd say that if I was dying! But it's him I'm thinking of."

"Girardot? Well, you may take it from me," with a chuckle, "that he's otherwise employed, ma'am. If I saw my lady grow pink when he come into the room, and her ladyship's hand shake when he spoke sudden, and her ladyship look out of the window

and sigh when he's not there, and her ladyship walk as if the gravel was springy moss under her feet when she started to Stag's Brook with him—if I see all that——"

Mrs. Jemmett's eyes glittered. "But you don't see that, Bowles, do you?"

"No, ma'am, I don't! But I see all that—or it's reported to me by them as does—in another quarter."

"Quick work, then!" decided the housekeeper.

"She's young, ma'am, she's young. And he—well, you know what he is."

"Poor thing!"

"Oh, she'll not be the first by a many," Bowles answered, rubbing his nose. "And he's the looks, and he may mean it this time. So I don't know as she is so much to be pitied, Mrs. J."

"Pooh! man." The housekeeper was scornful. "He's only playing with her. I don't see so much of her ladyship as you do. But I've seen enough of him."

"Well, I don't know. I'm not so certain sure, Mrs. J. It may have been as you say to begin, ma'am. But I'm not so sure now."

"Then he's just a donkey between two bundles of hay," Mrs. Jemmett retorted. "And if I were sure, I declare I'd speak to her ladyship. It'd open her eyes, anyway."

"You'd lose the young woman her place that minute," Bowles replied in alarm. "Her ladyship's never got over the way the girl came. No, ma'am, nor ever been sure that what she thought at the first was wrong. She'd jump at the chance of getting rid of her."

Mrs. Jemmett looked sharply at the butler. "Well, I never, Bowles! I do believe you've a weakness for the wench yourself."

Bowles preened himself. "No, ma'am, no," he said. "My wishes, as you know, is otherwise placed, Mrs. J."

—with a languishing look at the housekeeper. "I like some substance, ma'am. But my motto is, 'No interference!'"

"Well, you may be right," Mrs. Jemmett admitted. "But I do say that if her ladyship goes on sitting with him at every odd time right before the main door, the Captain will be blinder than I think him, if he don't take notice.

"Then he'll show himself a deal less wise than my lord."

"Ah, my man, a Blenheim's a good keeper, but it's only an apple after all!" Mrs. Jemmett rejoined, and though Bowles tried to provoke her to plainer speech, it was in vain.

That Rachel, a player in the game, saw less than the onlookers was natural. She had prepared herself for a life from which certain feelings were supposed to be banished, and she took it for granted that they were banished. She had not taken the coif, indeed, and the world was still open to her. But to an extent, little less than if she had done so, she knew herself to be parted by her employment from the emotional side of a girl's life. The baize door that shut off the schoolroom was her grille, and her views and her tastes were supposed to lie within it. If she read *Cecilia*, or *The Sorrows of Werter*, it must be in private; in public she must revel in the flowery pages of *Rasselas*, and for her the world must consist of only one sex.

This presumption, and her inexperience, closed her eyes a little longer than might have been expected to the path that she was treading. There were moments when she wondered why, with all her anxieties and with so much to depress her, she was content; why, with the thunder-cloud of her pupil constantly hanging over her, and with a pretty clear notion that Lady Ellingham looked coldly on her, she felt the drawbacks of her position so little; why, listening

wakeful to the sough of the wind through the forest, and the cry of the screech owl in the night, she had still only cheerful thoughts, and rising in the morning anticipated the day with an appetite for its chances. Something there was that added brilliance to the sunshine and a tender beauty to the evening; that awoke in her a passionate love for the woodland, its winding paths and its green retreats. But what this was that thus lapped her in warmth and security, that lightened her heart and gave spring to her pulses, she was too inexperienced to inquire.

She only told herself, and with gratitude, that people were kind to her, that all went well with her, and that in no other position would she have been better placed or more happy. If she looked more often than was necessary in the tarnished mirror and tried more than one way of dressing her hair or setting her cap—well, she was a girl and young, and what was more natural?

And then, on the day before that on which Captain Dunstan was expected, she met with a shock that in a single moment of time enlightened her. The matter was itself the merest trifle; it was the effect which it had on her that drove the truth home. She was looking from her bedroom window, and she saw a thing that she had seen before. Down one of the avenues, walking slowly towards the house with the sunset behind them and the evening peace about them, came two persons; my lady, slow, stately, languid, her companion graceful, animated, bending towards her in intimate talk, and now and again enforcing his words with a gesture. Rachel had seen the same thing more than once and without a thought or suspicion. Now it caused her a pang as swift, as sharp, as arresting, as if an arrow had pierced her breast—a pang that drove her from the window, to stand breathless in the middle of the floor, battling with a pain as new as was the knowledge it taught her.

She tried to reason, she tried to reassure herself.

But it was useless. She stood, breathing quickly, shaken to the depths of her being. She knew! She knew at last, and she covered her consciou; face with her hands. She knew the secret of her content, of the warmth that had lapped her, of the spell that had transfigured alike the woodland path and the daily toil.

The suspicion went for nothing. It fell harmless from the shield of her innocence—the conjuncture of the two meant nothing. But the veil that had masked her feelings from herself was rent, and rent beyond mending. She saw where she stood and what had happened to her during those weeks. Because he had been kind, because he had been of service to her, because he had thrown her a few kind words and teased her and drolled with her, because he had laughing eyes and curly hair and a slender shape——

She buried her hot face in her hands. She in her position! And oh, the folly of it, the shameful weakness of it, when he had never said a word, never looked a look—so she told herself—to encourage her. The fault lay all with her, and the weakness. And now—now all that remained to her was to conquer it; to free her heart from this foolishness that had coiled itself about it, to shut her ears to the siren and her eyes to the sweet charm that had painted all things in colours so entrancing. She must be strong, and, above all things, pride and self-respect required that she must be secret. She must bury her silliness as she might, hiding her weakness from every eye, and especially from his.

Above all, she must show the same face to him that she had ever shown. She must harden herself and accustom herself. But this was not so easy to do as to plan, and she was aware of that; so that it was an absent and taciturn Rachel who played her part next day, who saw Ann's mistakes one moment and forgot to correct them the next, who for minutes

lost herself in a reverie, and once, to the child's angry surprise, rapped her sharply over the knuckles. A Rachel who, when Ann had left her, moved uneasily and restlessly about the room, unable to settle to anything.

And then the moment that she dreaded came.

She heard the baize door shriek, she heard his step in the passage and she took herself sternly in hand —was it not for this that she had been steeling herself all the morning? He came in, smiling, debonair, flourishing an open pen-knife, in his gayest, maddest mood.

"Pens! Pens! Bring out your pens!" he cried. "Pens to mend!" Then seeing that she was stooping over the table, apparently intent on putting things straight after the morning's work, he struck an attitude. "Now, there's the woman to the life! All disorder she can mend! And to her duties nice attend! But when it comes unto a knife—then the man comes in!"

"But really I am well supplied, Mr. Girardot," she said soberly. She was still busying herself about the table.

"Nonsense, ma'am, nonsense! With such an imp to spoil them? Impossible! You cannot be!"

"Oh, she is growing better. Better than she was, I mean." She ventured to look up and smile.

"But, dear lady, this will never do! If there are no pens to mend, I shall be tempted to sever one of those little ringlets! Those *boucles folâtres*, that have caught even the stubborn Ann in their meshes! Come, come, the knife cuts empty air! Which shall it be?"

Twenty-four hours before Rachel would have accepted his badinage with a blush and a smile as merely Mr. Girardot's nonsense; nor asked herself how far his laughing eyes and jesting words were winding themselves about her heart. To-day she was wiser, with a sad wisdom! But she dared not check him

too suddenly, or he might—oh, stinging thought—suspect. And as playfully as she could, "Well, I am afraid you must drop the aspirate," she said—cleverly as she thought—"and save the steel, Mr. Girardot."

But she was not clever enough. He caught the new note in her voice. "And save the steel?" he repeated slowly. "I see. But—is something the matter, ma'am?"

She looked at him, innocently enough. "The matter? No, Mr. Girardot. Why?"

"Well, methinks," he answered with a whimsical look, "there is a little too much of 'Mr. Girardot' this morning! Too much of formality. Have we offended? Have we trespassed? Or has Ann been troublesome? Or is it," he continued with a droll look, "that the virtue of the pens that I am not permitted to mend—is wearing out?"

"I know how good you have been," she said. But she could not put heart into her words, or speak as she would have spoken the day before.

And he saw it, of course. "Have been?" He raised his eyebrows. "And why not, ma'am, 'how good you are'? Is that too because the virtue of the pens is wearing out? And we are no longer on probation, but are established, settled, able to stand on our own little feet? And need no further help, eh? I see," he added slowly, "I see."

That hurt Rachel and she coloured. "But you don't see," she said warmly. "It is not that."

"But I fear it is that. Poor little knife!" he continued, addressing it. "You are no longer of use, no longer wanted! There are no more knots to cut! No more tangles to sever! Henceforth you are of use only to—cut our friends."

Oh, he was too much for her! She turned to the bookshelf to hide the tears that welled up in her eyes. "Please don't say that," she begged, and, alas,

the traitorous tears were in her voice also. "You know it is not that."

He seized on the admission. "Then what is it?"

The imminence of the danger restored her self-control. She had hoped that without betraying herself she might place their relations on a new footing, and by a reserve too measured to be noticed set him at a distance. But he had in a moment pierced her defences; in another moment he might force her to avow that they were too—too intimate; and she would rather die than betray herself in that way. In such a strait women can compass much, and, desperate, Rachel turned to him, she even smiled at him. "Well, if you must know," she confessed, "Ann has been troublesome this morning, and I lost my temper. And I slapped her. And I am vexed with myself."

"And how," he inquired, and with genuine curiosity, "did my Lady Ann take it? She did not slap you back?"

"No. Astonishingly well. And made me the more ashamed of myself."

It was surprising how singularly the brightness of her eyes, which were still moist, and a kind of shyness that he had not seen in her of late, became her. "Poor little girl!" he said, and he drew a step nearer. "You are upset, I see. Shall I feel your pulse—and prescribe for you?"

But Rachel knew that if he touched her she would burst into tears, and she drew back. "Thank you, I have my own prescription," she said.

"And that is?"

If only he would take his eyes, his keen, humorous, dominating eyes off her! "Solitude and sewing," she replied, as lightly as she could. "They are to a woman what wine, I suppose, is to a man."

"But we only prescribe wine in serious cases," he

answered, considering her. "And solitude? By that I suppose you wish me gone?"

"I have had Ann all the morning." She let her weariness appear.

"Poor girl! Poor little thing! Well, I obey. But—if you shut yourself up whenever Ann is naughty, heaven help your friends! I take it," with a searching glance, "that I still am—that I count as a friend?"

"Of course!" she said. But the question pressed her home and the tell-tale blood rose to her cheeks.

He nodded. "Ah!" He said no more. He went out slowly, and she was left to doubt, and, alas, gravely to doubt, if she had deceived him. But to think, even to suspect that she had not, and that he had seen through her coldness and understood its motive, was terrible. She told herself that she was very unhappy—and a week, only a week before, how happy she had been, how blest in her ignorance!

Saturday, the last day of November, fell two days later, and was warm for the season. But, mild as it was, an alfresco tea was out of the question, and Rachel was thankful for this. She was spared his company in circumstances that would have awakened every fond recollection and every moving sentiment. But although there could be no tea, Ann was bent on going to Stag's Hole, and Rachel was forced to accompany her, though the sunshine, that pierced the half-leafless trees and shot the mossy banks with jewels, no longer held any brightness for her, nor the long vistas of gleaming beech-trunks any loveliness. Still she was free to think her own thoughts and feed her melancholy; and, arriving at the spot, while Ann strayed here and there about her ploys, Rachel, seated on a fallen trunk, gave way to dreams, so immersed in the internal battle that she was fighting, that the squirrel cracking beech-mast in the branches behind her, sat and watched her with fearless eyes.

If only she might never see him again! That was

beginning to be her cry. If by one sharp wrench, one savage operation, she might free herself from the cruel noose that was winding itself about her heart and slowly compressing it. Yet, if she did not see him again! If all the world turned colourless and cold, and only east winds blew and clouds hung ever grey between her and the sun! Poor girl, it was a long and sad road that her thoughts travelled that afternoon; a road harder than she had thought to travel. But all things end and at length with a jerk she came back to the present—the present that chimed in strangely with her sad fancies. For the sky had grown overcast, the wind cold, the outlook grey. The sun had set. It was late, far later in the day than she had supposed.

Alarmed, she looked about her for Ann. Where was she? "Lady Ann!" she cried anxiously. "Ann! Where are you?"

Ann was not far off, and, of course, was in mischief. She had doffed her shoes and stockings and was paddling in the brook, November though it was. Her hardy little legs showed raw-red through the clear water, and well aware that she had stolen a march on her companion, she was wantonly set on pushing her advantage to the utmost. Instead of coming out when bidden, she moved over to the other side of the brook. "No hurry!" she said, perfunctorily and without looking up. "I'll come out in a minute!"

"You should never have gone in!" Rachel replied angrily, aware that she was herself in fault.

But Ann was equally aware of that, and rejoiced in an iniquity which her governess shared. "Well, you never told me not to!" she retorted.

"And here is your bracelet on the bank!"

"I put it there. It is quite safe."

"Now come out at once! Ann, I insist on it." Rachel stormed. "Do you hear?" And, after a little parley, Ann consented to come out, probably

because the water was cold—and she alone could have borne it so long. But her feet, numb and stone-cold, had to be rubbed and dried, and her stockings and shoes to be put on, and, to Rachel's dismay, her petticoats were wet. Then to everything that had to be done, the child opposed a passive resistance, so that more than twenty minutes elapsed before they were ready to start.

Rachel knew herself to blame, and that she should not have suffered the child to paddle at this season —and once they were on the homeward path she resolutely pressed the pace, so that when they emerged from the forest and sighted the house, some margin of daylight still remained. But then a dreadful thing happened. "I'll have my bracelet now," Ann said.

"Your bracelet?"

"You took it from the bank, you know. I saw you."

"Oh!" Rachel exclaimed, and stood, horror-stricken. "I left it on the tree where we were sitting."

"Well," Ann cried in triumph. "You've done it now! It's your forget. And we'll have to go back. And it will be dark, black dark, before we get home. Hurrah!"

Rachel was appalled. The bracelet was a gift of Captain Dunstan's, and, being set with amethysts, was of value. According to Ann's version, it had been presented to him by a French lady in acknowledgment of his generous treatment of the passengers on a French packet that he had taken in the Indian seas. My lord, on the other hand, maintained that it had been loot, bought for half a guinea from a fo'c'sle hand. But whichever story was true, its loss would be no small thing, and Ann knew this and made the most of it. "Hurrah!" she cried. "It's almost dark now, and we must go back!"

"You will do nothing of the kind," Rachel answered

with temper. "You will go straight to the house. It's not two hundred yards, and no harm can come to you. It is still light. I will go back for it."

"But it is mine and I——"

"You will go straight home!" Rachel insisted, firm for once.

"Well," rebelliously, "I shall tell mother whose fault it was!"

But Rachel was angry and a little frightened. "You will do as you are told!" she said.

For once Ann gave way. "Well, all right," she said sulkily. "You need not get into a pucker about it. It wasn't my fault. I didn't lose it."

"And you will change your petticoats the moment you reach the house."

She stood and watched the child until she was within a hundred yards of the entrance-gates. Then, satisfied that no harm could come to her charge, Rachel turned, and as fast as she could she retraced her steps, little thinking that with every yard she was spinning a new colour into the thread of her life. She knew that dusk would be upon her before she could reach the brook, and that much of her return journey must be made in the dark, and under such conditions she had no taste for the loneliness of the forest. Still, if anything happened to the bracelet she would be responsible, and she hardened her heart and put her best foot foremost. But she had already walked some miles, and her strength was flagging when at last she saw below her, dim and shadowy now, the open space beside the brook.

She saw it with relief, for it would be something at least to turn her face towards home and to have the terrors of the forest at her back, and she dropped quickly down to it. But when she was within twenty yards of the spot, which a zigzag in the path had hidden for a moment, she perceived with alarm that it was tenanted. Two men were there, one seated on

the fallen tree on which she had sat, the other standing with a foot on it. They had not heard her approach, for, with their heads close together, they were examining by the dim light something which the seated man held in his hand.

The bracelet. It must be that.

Then for a moment she breathed more freely. No doubt the men were two of the forest rangers, and with that happy thought in her mind she approached them boldly, too anxious about the bracelet to count chances.

But when she was within five paces of the men they heard her and turned, and the one who was seated sprang to his feet. And now—when it was too late to avoid them—she took in their aspect, and it was with a shock of fear that she saw that they were not keepers. One wore an old uniform-coat and a soldier's broken hat, and both were filthy and ragged, with vagrant written plain upon their squalid persons. Rachel hesitated, alarm driving the colour from her face. She was alone, the dusky woodland rose high on each side, walling her in, and they held the bracelet. To them it was a monstrous prize, and help in that solitary place and at that hour was out of the question.

CHAPTER IX

A BRUTE!

BUT the blood of the sturdy old divine, who was Mrs. South's pride, ran in the girl's veins. She owned the spirit that in a desperate strait rises to meet the emergency, and, with courage, wit also came at her call. She turned and deliberately beckoned with her hand as if to someone above her. "Stay there!" she cried. "I've found it!" Her voice rang unnaturally shrill, but it was only the clearer for that. Then she turned and with coolness, forced indeed, but the men could not know that, "You've found my bracelet!" she said. "I am much obliged to you. I shall be glad to—" for a moment her voice weakened, for the ruffians' greedy eyes and lowering faces appalled her—"to reward you with a shilling for finding it."

Her appearance had startled the men almost as much as their presence had startled her, for they too had their grounds for fear. They stared at her, doubtful and suspicious—stared at her and stared also with keen eyes up the path by which she had descended. There might be others with her—more likely than not, at that hour; and it was well to be on the safe side. So, after a pause of suspense during which Rachel could almost hear her heart beat, one of the two answered her. "God bless your feeling heart, ma'am," he said in a whining tone. "We're poor men, ma'am, and hungry. If you have a shilling we'll thank you kindly."

But their looks belied his words, and Rachel's fears began to get the better of her. Still, with an effort, "Then here is the shilling," she said. "You are very welcome to it." She fumbled for her purse, and got it out. But her fingers shook so nervously that she had much ado to separate the coin from others, and meantime the shadowy path on which the men's eyes were fixed disclosed no followers.

The man who had spoken nudged the other. "All right," he said, more roughly. "Give us your shilling!" He advanced a step and held out his hand. But when Rachel presented the coin he grabbed the purse instead, and when she recoiled in terror, she found that the second man had slipped behind her and had cut off her retreat.

Then, "D—n your shilling," the man with the purse growled, casting off the mask. "A pretty slut you, to offer us a shilling! Blast your impudence! What else have you got?"

She was far from help, and she could have no doubt now that they meant the worst, and that she was in deadly peril. But she kept her head, though she knew that at any moment panic might seize her by the throat. "Then keep the purse, and give me the bracelet," she said as steadily as she could. "And I will—I will say nothing about it. But the bracelet is Lady Ellingham's, and if it is missed there will be a search."

"Search be d—d!" the man retorted. "We'll search you, and see if there's no more of the rhino about you! Or another of these pretty shiners!" and before Rachel could move the rogue sprang forward and grasped her by the shoulder. "Here, Droughty," he cried, as she made a desperate attempt to wrest herself from him, "hold the little devil's hands, and we'll see what she's good for! Hold the trull's hands, do you hear, you fool, and I'll soon——"

But at that, and at last, Rachel's courage gave way,

and she shrieked—what else could she do ?—shrieked with all the power of a woman's lungs. The wretch who held her tried to thrust the tippet that covered her shoulders into her mouth. "Stow it, you little slut!" he cried. "Shut your pipe, will you?" But she fought with the strength of despair, her cries rang again and again down the dark aisles, scaring the wood-pigeons from their perches; and happily the second man was more timid or less forward, and hung off. But her resistance could not have lasted many seconds, she was nearly at the end of her strength, when a sound louder than her screams—the report of a gun—rent the air. It paralysed her assailant, for the explosion was so near that the shots passed through the branches overhead. The ruffian's hands lost their grip, and she tore herself loose. The second man was already wheeling about, ready-poised for flight.

"What the devil is it?" a voice shouted from the farther side of the brook. The undergrowth in that quarter rustled and quivered, a figure broke through it, and appeared at the brink of the water. "What's wrong there?"

It was enough. The intruder might be alone, but he had a gun, and the law, with its short shrift and halter, was behind him. As he leapt the brook, the men turned and fled. He had a glimpse of them, saw that they were two, had time to mark their appearance. Then only the sound of breaking branches betrayed the direction in which they were making off.

The man whose arrival had been so timely had reached the fallen trunk, and a second man had emerged beside the brook before the former saw the girl leaning exhausted against a tree. He stared at her almost as if he had not expected to see something of the kind. "The devil!" he exclaimed. "Well, I thought, by G—d, no rabbit could squeak like that! A boatswain's whistle was nothing to it! Are you hurt?"

His tone was abrupt and compelling, but Rachel could not speak. She could only shake her head. "D—d landsharks!" he muttered. "Lord, who'd live ashore where such things be and your life not safe an hour? Were they for robbing you, my girl?"

Still she could not speak—she was feeling very sick—but she nodded. "Here, Tobin," the Captain said—for the Captain it was—"take my gun and chase those sharks. If they show fight, bear away and fire into them. Haul them to the constable's, d'you hear, and see them in irons! I'll stand by the young woman."

The keeper took the gun and hurried away down the stream in the direction that the men had taken. The Captain turned to the girl. "Coming to?" he asked.

Rachel heaved a deep sigh and found her voice. "Yes," she whispered. "But if you had not come up"—a shudder seized her, shaking her from head to foot—"they would have murdered me."

The Captain cast an eye round. In the open space a faint light still lingered, but in the wood about them it was night. He doubted. The circumstances were queer. "You're the governess, ain't you," he said, "that I gave a lift to?"

"Yes." She was beginning to recover control of herself.

"I thought so, by gad! Thought I knew the cut of your jib. Well, ma'am, what the blazes were you doing here? At this time of night?" There was suspicion in his tone.

"I left the bracelet—Lady Ann's bracelet—here," she murmured. "It was my fault and I came back for it."

"A d—d silly thing to do!"

"Those men had found it. Please, will you look. I saw them drop it when—when you came up. It is

by the tree, I think." With a shudder she pointed to the place.

He stooped, peered about, and after a short search he found the bracelet lying among the fallen leaves. "Five pounds worth," he said. "And you were foolish enough to come here for it—at this time! You ought to be broke for it, ma'am. But," he looked doubtfully at her, "are you sure that you are speaking by the mark, young woman? Not pipe-claying the account, eh? Didn't come here to meet some young shaver?"

The blood returned to Rachel's face. "No!" she said indignantly. "I left the bracelet and I came back to look for it. The men had found it and I—I was too near them, when I saw them, to escape. I had to—to do the best I could!" Her voice shook, for she was on the verge of angry tears. "I—I offered them a shilling—for finding it. I thought that they were going to take the shilling, but they seized my purse and—and took hold of me, and I——" At last, under the stress of the things remembered, she broke down and sobbed without check.

The Captain, staring at her, wished himself anywhere else, and after watching her for a moment, "Oh, for God's sake, don't pipe up like that," he said irritably. "They've cleared off, and you are safe and there's an end of it. It was your fault for coming ashore without leave, young woman. Come, come, ma'am, enough of that! Can you walk?"

She tried to choke back her sobs. She stammered that she could.

"Then let's be going! The sooner the better, if you don't want your name to be sent up to the quarter-deck to-morrow! Come, come, brace up, ma'am! And first haul in your sheets!"

He pointed to her tippet and kerchief which the ruffian's violence had dragged from her shoulders, leaving them partly bare. Rachel had been uncon-

scious of it ; now with a blush which the darkness covered, and a healthy sting of anger that did her good, she tucked in the kerchief and drew the tippet down. The Captain's roughness spared her at any rate the pain of obligation, and as she turned with trembling limbs to go with him, the effort costing her more than he thought, she made up her mind that he was the most odious man she had ever met. When he offered his arm she declined it curtly—she would walk till she dropped before she would take it ! "No," she said. "I can walk better by myself—I thank you."

"Well, I dare say you can. There's certainly one thing you can do, young woman, and that is scream ! Lord, it goes through my head now."

Brute ! Rachel thought.

"Tobin would have it that it was a rabbit, but I said, no rabbit ! " He chuckled at the remembrance. "No rabbit in a stoat's mouth ever made a noise like that."

And the man called himself a gentleman ! Rachel trembled with indignation. And presently, her wounded spirit giving her strength, "Have you ever been in danger of your life ? " she asked. "Very near to—to death, sir ? "

He seemed to take time to think. Then, "Well, young woman, once or twice. Within hail of it, may be."

"And were you not frightened ? " she asked viciously.

She fully expected that he would deny it and she had made up her mind not to believe him. But with a sort of relish, "Frightened ? " he said. "Lord, you may swear to that ! Frightened ? I wished myself anywhere else I can tell you, as I wager you did ! Wished myself ashore, by G—d ! "

The admission disappointed her, but she took it up. "Yet you are a man ! " she said, a sting in her tone. "And—and I was a woman and—helpless !

Don't you think I had a right to be frightened?"

"And to scream. To be sure! Why not? Of course you had, and you did it too, ma'am!" He laughed again at the remembrance. "You did it, by Jove, as if you'd been tied up at the gangway."

Oh, he was a brute! He deserved no answer and Rachel vouchsafed none. If obligation there was, if he had saved her life, he had certainly wiped off the debt, and she owed him nothing! She plodded doggedly up the ascent, dragging one foot after another, and presently he began to whistle to himself. Then in place of whistling he fell to humming:

> "At the Battle of the Nile I was there all the while,
> I was there all the while at the battle of the Nile,"

in a way that vividly recalled to her her ride in the post-chaise. Her nerves were on edge with exhaustion, and after a time she could bear it no longer. She had to speak. "That is doggerel! she said irritably. "It isn't poetry."

"No," he replied coolly. "It is better. It is truth."

"Were you there?" She longed to snub him.

"Well, it happens I was," he answered dryly. "There or thereabouts."

She was taken aback, a little shocked too by her own rudeness. "Then do you know Lord Nelson?" she asked with, weary as she was, a scrap of interest. For Nelson's name was already a name to conjure with. His portrait and Lady Hamilton's were in every print-shop; his character, his exploits, his past, were the subjects of a thousand arguments, debates, disputations. He was belauded, slandered, deified, belittled. Some worshipped him, some sneered at him. But with the populace he was an idol, and when he appeared in public the common people crowded about him as if he had been a monarch walking the streets.

"Yes, I've seen him," the Captain admitted—reluctantly as it seemed. "Nothing to see! A little chap, light in the waist and thin as a curl-paper, about your rig, ma'am! Thinning on the fore-top, which you are not. Nothing to look at and mild as milk, God bless you. One arm, one eye, about half a man, and sick as a three-months-old puppy when there's a breeze. Weighs about half a ship's boy. But in action, when the bulkheads are down and the linstocks are lighted, then, ma'am——"

He paused so long that Rachel said "Yes?"

"A flame of fire!"

"Oh!" The words were so unlike the speaker that Rachel gasped.

He whistled. "Lights ahead!" he announced. "Thank God we're here." His next words were a fresh surprise. "Well, I'll say this, young woman! You are not of the swooning sort, and thank heaven for that, for I know more about missing stays than unlacing them, and begad I thought at one time that it would come to that! What? Sheering off? The door's open and they're looking out for us. I expect——"

"I go in by the side door," Rachel said. "Thank you!" She paused in the act of turning away, and then—she could not be churlish after all—"I am much obliged to you—for what you did," she added.

"Well, I could not do much less!" In a moment he was almost good-humoured.

"No, that is true," she said. "Thank you."

She was moving away to the side door, her one desire to enter without notice. But unfortunately, as she did so, the light that poured from the open entrance fell upon her. "Is that Miss South?" a voice asked—a voice bleak as the east wind.

Rachel had no choice after that but to advance into the light.

"Yes," she faltered. "I have been detained, Lady

Ellingham. I am very sorry. I sent Lady Ann back. I—I hope she came in."

"She came in, yes—soaked to the waist," Lady Ellingham replied in cutting accents. "If this," as poor Rachel, hardly able to keep her feet, crept into the full light of the hall, and, white with fatigue, stood exposed, in all the disorder of her dress, to the looks of the servants whom my lady's anger had brought to the spot, "if this is an instance of your care of Ann, Miss South! And of your own conduct——"

"She's had a bit of a burst-up," muttered the Captain, making eyes over the culprit's head.

But my lady was too angry to be diverted. She had never taken to the governess, for reasons best known to herself; and those unlucky wet petticoats and this late return, which the Captain's company did not mitigate, completed the business. "I am most seriously displeased, Miss South," she said.

Rachel was too sick and too weary to contend, but she made an effort to explain. "I left Lady Ann's bracelet," she pleaded. "And I went back for it, and——"

The Countess cut her short. "I will hear your excuses to-morrow," she answered. "I wish to hear no more now. Will you be good enough to go to your room?"

"Oh, come, Kitty," the Captain remonstrated. "You don't understand——"

"I understand enough," Lady Ellingham retorted. "I wish to hear no more. Be good enough to go to your room, Miss South, and I will speak to you in the morning."

Rachel attempted no further defence. She walked trembling to the staircase, her heart bursting with indignation. Oh, these cruel, inhuman, unfeeling people! The lights dazzled her, the floor moved up and down, the stairs wavered before her, it was only by seizing the friendly hand-rail that she managed to keep her feet until she had passed up and was out of

sight. And that coward who had said hardly one word for her ! Who had allowed her to be blamed and reprimanded and put to shame before the servants ! Who had let her fight her own battle, though he knew what she had gone through, though he knew what she had suffered, and how ill she was !

She went giddily along the passages and gained at last the haven of her room. She turned the key in the lock, and the world, the hard cruel world shut out, she flung herself, crying bitterly, on her bed. One thought was still uppermost in her. "The coward ! Oh, the coward ! " she sobbed again and again. And she thought how differently, how nobly another would have behaved in his place ! How boldly, and with what eloquence *he* would have sprung to the rescue, how staunchly, how manfully he would have insisted on being heard ! Ah, he would ! He would not have suffered her to be wronged and stood by silent—though for him to take up her cause spelled courage indeed ! For he, like her, was a dependant !

It was in the injustice, the unfairness of it that the sting lay. She was a dependant, and therefore, wrong or right, she was condemned in advance. She was helpless, powerless.

But it was all for the best—she was brought so low that she admitted it bitterly. In the morning she would be sent away, she would be sent home in disgrace. But better so ! Far better that she should go, before she had fresh occasion to compare *him* with others, before *his* goodness so grew upon her as to sap the last strongholds of pride and self-respect ! Before the sweet plague, that had stolen so insensibly, so subtly, into her veins, overcame her altogether, and she had no longer the strength of mind to hide her folly.

CHAPTER X

BROTHER AND SISTER

"WRETCHED little girl!" the Countess exclaimed, as the door of the library closed on her and her brother-in-law. "She let Ann come home alone, though it was as good as dark. And the child's petticoats were drenched to the gathers!"

The Captain took out his case and chose a cigar with care. He settled himself in a chair. "May I smoke?" he asked. "Bad habit, but second nature. West Indian station, you know."

She was too much out of temper to assent by more than an ungracious gesture. She stood before the fire, tapping the floor with her foot. At length, at his ease, and his cigar alight, "Discipline—officers must be supported," the Captain said, "so I kept my mouth shut. But you are on the wrong tack, my dear. And you'll have to go about."

His quiet leisurely words only increased her irritation. "Oh!" she exclaimed, "don't tell me that you too are taken with that little creature with the turn-up nose! I thought that you had some sense, George. If it had been Fred now——" She shrugged her shoulders.

"I believe that that is what you have in your mind—Fred," he answered placidly. "But you are wrong, my dear."

"Well," she retorted, with two angry spots on her cheeks, "I believe you thought so once."

"If I did then, I was wrong. And I did Fred an

injustice. Believe me, he's not come down to that yet. But I am not dealing with him now—only I think it is that which has set you off your course, Kitty. So let's put back to—to to-day. If anyone was to blame it was Ann. She got wading——"

"In November!" my lady cried with a flash of indignant eyes. "And whose business was it to prevent her?"

The Captain shrugged his shoulders. "The girl's, of course. But the woman's not born that can control Ann when the devil's in her. A boatswain and two boatswain's mates with a rope's end apiece and every man of them with eyes at the back of his head couldn't keep Ann out of mischief when she has a mind to it. And you expect that little chit as big as a sprit-sail yard to keep her from it? Ann got in the water—as get in the water she would if there was water to get in—and the girl dried her as well as she could and hurried her home."

"But she did not bring her home."

"She brought her to within a hundred yards of the house."

Lady Ellingham lifted her chin. "You are well up in her story!" she said.

"And then the girl went back for something that they had forgotten."

"I suppose that also was Ann's fault?"

"No, it was not. She had taken off her bracelet—the one I gave her, you know—and the girl took charge of it for safety, and while drying the child she laid it down and forgot it. She went back for it."

"Then she should have done nothing of the kind!" Lady Ellingham declared, glad to find some vent for her annoyance. "She should have come in and sent a man for it."

"I suppose she thought," the Captain suggested, watching the smoke rise from his cigar, "that if she came back without it she'd be booked for punishment.

Anyway, she bore away though it was late, and I don't suppose she liked it. When she reached the place—it was pretty dark, and a mile from home, mind you—there were two landlubbers there, one of them a deserter by his coat, and, by God, they'd got the bracelet."

Lady Ellingham's attention was caught at last. "And what did she do?"

"Do? Well, she couldn't get away—she was too close to them. So she went up as bold as brass and offered them a shilling for finding it—just as if she'd been in Berkeley Square. And nearly carried it off, the little baggage, by sheer impudence—where there wasn't, mind you, a soul within a mile of her to help her. But when they saw the purse it was too much for them, and they snatched it, and caught hold of her and were for searching her!"

"Ah!" The listener winced. The red spots were gone from her cheeks.

"Just so," said the Captain coolly. "It was 'Ah!'"

"And—what did she do then?"

"Squealed like a rabbit in a trap, only ten hundred times louder! What else could she do—against two d—d louts of gaol-birds? Luckily I was coming home with Tobin and heard her, and, thinking it was either the father of all rabbits in a trap or a woman's pipe, I fired my gun and steered for her. She was nearly done when I came up! I've no doubt they'd have murdered her if I'd not."

"The wretches!"

"They sheered off when we came up. Tobin chased, and I stood by the girl. Confounded fix I was in, Kitty, when I saw how they'd handled her, and I wished I'd kept him, for she looked like foundering, and where should I have been? However, I called her a silly little fool, and read the Articles of War to her—outstaying her leave, and so on, and she came

round. I could see that she was pretty deep by the head, still, but she never let me lay a hand to her—thought me a pretty brute, no doubt! But I tell you, my dear, she's a d—d plucky piece, as plucky as any thirteen-year-old middy that ever smuggled into a cutting-out boat. And there's nothing beats that!"

"She's evidently won your heart," my lady said.

"A white-faced chit with a turn-up nose, my dear?"

"Well," she allowed reluctantly, "perhaps I've——"

"Made a mistake? You have. And to-morrow you'll have to sing small, and set it right, Kitty."

Lady Ellingham studied the point. "The bracelet is lost, I suppose?"

"No. And I'm not sure that that is not the queerest thing of all. One of the men dropped it, when he sighted me. Well, that little girl, and the brute's hands hardly off her, had the coolness to see it fall and tally the place. She told me where it was, and I found it."

The Countess looked uncomfortable. She was far from being an ungenerous woman when her instincts had fair play.

"Do you know," he resumed, looking at the end of his cigar, "I thought—from something you said last evening—that you were beginning to like her."

"Well," my lady admitted, "perhaps I was. More than at first. "But——"

"But what?"

"The last week or two I've thought that she was seeing too much of—of Mr. Girardot, if you must know. And that would not do at all. It would be the end of her as a governess. Instead of looking after Ann she'd be mooning after him. I shouldn't wonder if that was not at the bottom of this."

"But Girardot wasn't there."

"Oh, no, I don't say——"

"But was he? Do you know?"

"I know he wasn't. He was here. But I am speaking generally. A governess who——" She shrugged her shoulders and did not finish the sentence. "Impossible!"

The Captain rolled a loose leaf round his cigar, a feat that seemed to require all his attention. "Well, I'm going to speak generally too," he said. "Though God knows it's not my place to speak. Aren't you seeing rather too much of that young man, Kitty?"

"George!"

"I know," he said. "You are angry, and good reason. No business of mine. But—well, I don't like the young gentleman and I don't trust him. He's too clever and too glib. And"—carefully scrutinizing his cigar—"too d—d good-looking altogether. And though you don't think, perhaps he will think, and other people will talk. And Fred—more blame to him, and more fool he!—isn't here."

"If he were," she retorted, the red spots back in her cheeks, "he would never insult me even by the thought!" Her head was high.

"And he'd be right, my dear, for he's a d—d inconsequent chap. Has the wisdom to know that his wife is ice while he thinks every other man's wife is—tinder! I agree with him—on the first head. But Master Girardot may be of a different opinion, and if you don't send him over to the lee side in time he'll be forgetting himself, and one of these fine days he'll give you a bad quarter of an hour."

She flashed out at him, her face scarlet. "You've no right," she cried passionately—"no right to say that!"

He looked at her very kindly, unmoved by the challenge. "Haven't I?" he said. "Well, you are the judge of that. Anyway, I'll say no more. I've said enough—perhaps too much. But I want to out with another thing—I'll let the whole cable run while I am about it. I'm not defending Fred. God knows

he's to blame and the only one to blame, and he knows what I think. But, my dear, he's young and he married very young. He fell in love with your eyes, Kitty, before he had had his splash. And he's almost as good-looking—confound him !—as the young spark here, and he's Ellingham and all that, and the women fall over one another for him."

"And it is not his fault, of course !" My lady's tone was as cold as contempt could make it. "You talk—you talk as if it was my fault that he—Oh, you make me sick !" She turned her back on the Captain and rested her hands on the mantel-shelf. Her raised foot tapped the fender.

"No, it's his fault," the Captain said. "And a confounded fool he is, and some day he will find it out—perhaps when it is too late. But——"

"Well ?"

"He loves you."

"Loves me ? Loves me ?" She turned about, her face white with passion, her eyes gleaming. "Loves me—and Lady Fanny ! And that woman—at Maidenhead ! And the creature that he—Oh !" she continued struggling with the indignation that choked her, "you flatter me ! You flatter me too highly, George ! Loves me ? When his love, sir, is an insult ! An outrage ! A thing that makes all worse and no better. How is it possible that he should love me and go after—after those creatures ?"

"Because he's a man, my dear." The Captain spoke with care, choosing his words. "And can love in half a dozen ways and half a dozen women at once. But don't think that he has ever ceased to love you, or loves another woman in the same way. And he's not—God knows I am not defending him, and he's bad enough—but he's not as black as he's painted, of course"—the Captain looked ill at ease as he broached this part of his argument—"if he'd been a Joseph there'd have been no Lady Fanny and no

Miss—well, I won't name names, and I wish you didn't know them! But Joseph's part isn't an easy part to play for a man in Fred's place, my lady, and——"

"Oh, don't—don't say any more!" she cried, stopping her ears. "Unless you mean to make bad worse. Are these—are these things to say to a wife? To the mother of his children? To the girl whom he took from her home at eighteen and——"

"They are not things to be said by everybody," the Captain agreed soberly. "But they are things that someone ought to say to you—God knows I only want to keep the way open between you against the time when he will want to come back. And they are things that only an old friend can say. However, if you think, my dear, that I am sailing under false colours——" He broke off.

She stood for a full minute with her back to him, looking down into the heart of the fire; and he saw her shoulders heave. And, knowing her pride, he was scared. But presently she seemed to regain control of herself, and when she turned to him, though her lips quivered, there was a smile of unspeakable sweetness in her eyes.

"Yes, George, under the falsest colours," she said.

"Kitty!"

"Hiding under your sea-cloak the kindest heart that ever beat! A friend? Yes, the best friend, the truest friend that an unhappy woman ever had! How indeed should I have borne these three years since he —since he changed, if I had had no friend, no support, no one to take my side, to speak between us! And don't think," she added with energy, "that I don't know—for I have seen enough and learned enough of the world's vileness in three years—that I don't know that some in your place—ay, many—would have played another part! Would have seen in my loneliness—and God knows that I have been lonely

enough !—only an occasion, an opportunity ! " She paused, struggling with her emotion.

" Of course there are scoundrels enough," he said gloomily. " We're never out of hail of them ashore. But you don't think, Kitty, that I ever——"

" Never ! Never, George, thank God ! You have been to both of us the best, the truest of brothers. You have the right to say anything, all that you will, and I will hear it gratefully, oh, most gratefully ! "

" Then do you believe me, my dear," he replied quietly, " when I say that he is not as black as he is painted. But he is foolish enough to set his pride, once he broke with you, on seeming worse than he is. He's that kind of fool. Yet with it all he has never ceased to love you, and I'll wager a guinea to a ship-biscuit there are times when he could cut his throat with thinking of the old days. And some time he'll come back to you, as to his last port, and ask you to save him. And—and, Kitty, it is this I want to say to you—don't make it too hard for him when the time comes."

But at that her pride revolted. " Oh ! " she cried, " you ask too much ! When he is sated with his light-o'-loves I am to meet him half-way, smile on him, take him back ! Oh, you are monstrous ! No, George, you ask too much ! And love ? He loves me—still ? What kind of love can that be that leaves me here to eat my heart out while he—while he—Oh, no—a thousand times no ! We are better, far better, as we are ! Let him keep his Lady Fannys and his—I will not soil my lips with their names. And let me keep my self-respect."

The Captain was silent, sitting gloomy in his chair. He had said his say and had not looked for much more at present. " Convoy's sailing wide," he thought. " But they've got their orders, and by and by they'll come into line." He had smoked out his cigar, and, as he rose to throw the end into the fire, he touched

her on the shoulder. "Well, I've fired across your bows, my dear," he said, putting his thought into words. "And the rest is for you. But as to that little girl?"

"With the turn-up nose?" she said, with a queer laugh, as she surreptitiously dabbed her eyes. "You've your orders as to that too, I suppose."

"She deserved something better than she got. And you'll see to it, I am sure."

"This is the second time I've had to sing small. It was Mr. Girardot last time."

"Oh! So he——"

"Begged her off? Yes. I was for sending her away when I found her here. And now it is you, George."

"Well, I am not surprised," he said slowly. "It's what I should have expected of him. But that's her look-out. You may be sure that I'm not making up to her."

"I hope he is not," my lady said, and her face was grave.

CHAPTER XI

THE SURPRISE

A LITTLE chit of a governess shedding angry tears in the darkness of her room because she has been wronged, and excitement will find its vent! A young girl crying passionately in the night that she doesn't care! That she doesn't care! That she is glad to go, glad to leave this inhuman place, these cruel people! That it is all for the best if it does part her from the—the only being who has been kind to her, has been companion, tormentor, tease and friend, all in one! Not an heroic figure this, that, nursing its grievance, will not even take in the meal that Priscilla, the schoolroom maid, has placed in pitying mood outside the door.

But, alas, with the morning light a figure grown even less heroic—grown pale and dull and heavy-eyed. For when indignation, a fine warming fire, sinks to grey ashes it casts a chill. A pitiful chit, this, that, on second thoughts, does care: that sees before her a long miserable journey, and a tale of failure to be told at the end of it! That, as she tries to swallow her breakfast, chokes, because—though it is of course all for the best—she will never again break her fast in this dull little room that *he* has made bright. Because she will never again hear his step in the passage, see him enter with quizzing eyes, hear his gay laugh, his errand—that is but to droll with her, or cheer her, to make some pleasant appointment, to drop a laughing, flattering word that brings the blood to her face.

Yes, it is all for the best, she tells herself. But how flat and grey, endless and unbroken is the vista before her ! How low her heart as she faces it, and with unwilling eyes stares down its length ! She will return to her home, but the thought has lost its joy. Home itself has lost its warm hues, its welcoming face, its comfort.

Priscilla's voice roused her from her reverie. Priscilla had entered to take away. "You didn't see her ladyship's note, miss ? "

"Oh ! " The three-cornered note had lain beside her plate, but, absorbed in her wretchedness, she had not seen it. Her heart fluttered as she took it to the window that she might read it unwatched. And yet —she hastened to tell herself—it was no doubt only to say when her ladyship would see her.

But the note said more than this, and warmth stole through the desolate heart as she read it. "Lady Ellingham regrets that under a misapprehension of the facts she blamed Miss South in a manner which she now knows was not justified. She desires to recall what was said and trusts that Miss South is not the worse for her dangerous experience. Lady Ellingham will in the course of to-morrow see Miss South, as she desires to learn from her own mouth the details of her adventure."

It was not over-warm, but, coming from Lady Ellingham, it seemed to Rachel a surprising atonement. The past, her wrongs, her mortification, were forgotten, and for a moment the future glowed, all changed, transfigured, glorified. This dull dear little room was still to be hers—her home. She would meet him, see him, hear him.

Then cold wisdom plucked at her skirts, reminded her and warned her. If it were really for the best that she should go, she ought to seize on this pretext, slight but sufficient. She ought to use it and go. She ought to wrest herself from the cunning spell

that held her in its toils and that a few hours ago seemed to her awakened eyes to promise nothing but unhappiness.

But, alas, the spell appeared in another light now, wrought differently, wrought speciously, promised not unhappiness but—if only she were prudent—the pleasure of a dear friendship. She had only—so it assured her—to stop herself at that point, and surely she could stop herself. Was she her mother's daughter, and had she not sufficient pride and self-respect to control her feelings, and to stay where he stayed? Surely she had, surely she was not so weak, so unmaidenly, so wanting in pride. And though he had said nothing—at this point Rachel's thoughts grew confused and she trembled—was it certain that he—that he never would? And was she to make that impossible? To put from her the chance of happiness so great that it made her giddy, simply because she distrusted her own strength?

She leant her hot face against the cold panes of the window. Of course he meant nothing—nothing! How foolish she was! Still, was it possible that some day——?

She plucked herself from the thought, and forced herself to read the letter again. But all tended the same way. "It was he who spoke for me," she thought. "Oh, I am sure of it. It is to him I owe this!" And her heart melted towards him, and was as water. How good he was, how staunch, how true! When no one had dared to speak for her, he had braved her ladyship's anger and stood by her, and defended her. And made all clear. She had him to thank for it! She was sure of it.

And when, with the letter still in her hand, and Priscilla barely gone from the room, she heard his step, his step that she would have known among a hundred, and when he entered, not gaily, but with kind and anxious looks, was it wonderful that she felt

herself tremble? Or that he read in her downcast conscious face something that he had never read in it before, and at which his heart bounded?

But he was too wary and too experienced to frighten her, and he began as he had planned to begin. "You poor, poor little thing!" he said, without a tinge of his usual persiflage. "And I hear that they scolded you, bullied you. Oh, it was monstrous, it was barbarous! They must have hearts of iron! You had suffered so much, gone through so much, a savage would have pitied you! Sit!" He pushed up her chair, and laying a gentle hand on her shoulder, he forced her to take it, while her eyes, raised to his, put in an unconscious plea for forbearance. "Sit, I insist on it!" he continued warmly. "I will not hear a word until you do. I felt for you—ah, but you know that I felt for you! I could not sleep for thinking of their hardness, their injustice!"

She strove her utmost to control herself. She strove to struggle against his tenderness, against the solicitude that enveloped her as in a warm garment, against the melting influence of his voice, his eyes. She tried to murmur something—something about his kindness, and Lady Ellingham, and she tried to say it as she would have said it yesterday. But her mood and the man and his nearness were all against her, and her pleading eyes told a tale in spite of herself. Before she knew how it came about he was sitting on the table beside her chair, her hand in his; he was soothing her, comforting her. "A little, little thing!" he said, leaning over her blushing averted face, his voice itself a caress, and with just so much of jest in his tone as lightened its meaning. "A little, little thing!" he repeated fondly. "Not fit to stand alone!"

"I think—you did protect me," she whispered. But oh, the effort it cost her to speak, and the thrill that passed from hand to hand, and betrayed itself

in the tremor of her voice. She could not have raised her eyes or met his for her life.

"Who would not ?" he murmured, bending lower over her drooping head. "Who could be so hard as not to wish to protect you, to stand up for you ? So little of a man as not to dare to ? Not I ! Not I, Rachel dear ! If I had been in his place——"

"I am glad you were not !" she breathed.

"Why ? Do you not think that I——"

"Oh, yes, yes ! But you—might not have had a gun !" She shuddered, thinking of the risk, the danger to which he might have exposed himself.

"But you believe that I would have—don't you ? Ah, but I know you do. I am sure that you do."

"I know—I know you would." Her faith was whole, simple, perfect. And now, having found courage to speak, she found courage to try to recover her hand. "Please !" she said. "Please !"

"Why ?" his whisper was sweet in her ears. "Why, Rachel ? Do you want to escape from me ?"

"But I——" Confusion overcame her as she tried to recall her position, her duties, her resolve. "Oh, I must not ! Indeed, indeed, I must not ! I ought not to—to let you——"

But he continued to hold her hand, and she knew, God knows how, for her eyes were averted, that his lips brushed her hair. "I wonder what you must not ?" he whispered. "You do believe in me, Rachel, don't you ? You do believe that I——"

But at that the maiden in her—though one-half of her longed to hear the unspoken word—bade her defer the moment. Her modesty rose in revolt, made one last effort to escape the crisis. She struggled to her feet, though it seemed that she had to raise tons to do so. "I mustn't listen," she panted. "Indeed, indeed, I must not. Please, please, let me go !"

Her eyes looked everywhere for a way of escape. But his lips were near her ear, his whisper charmed it, she had not the strength to wrest away her hand.

"Little simpleton!" he said, in a tone that emptied the words of offence, and made them the sweetest of caresses. "Why may you not listen? Why so frightened?"

She knew that her strength had left her, but still the woman's instinct to put off the moment and to escape prevailed. She fluttered as the bird flutters in the tender hand that has grasped it. She must not, she must not listen. "Oh, but I am not here for this!" she stammered distractedly. "It is not right! Indeed, indeed, it is not right, Mr. Girardot! Please let me go! I want to think, I want to——"

"To think, my own?" And how the words thrilled her! "No, you want to feel! To feel! We are past thinking, my darling! We are on a happier road! We are——"

A squeak—a small sound, but it rang in her ear like a trumpet, for it was the squeak of the baize door. A step in the passage!

"D—n!" the tutor exclaimed.

He was at the window in two strides. His face was almost as hot as Rachel's, but, as his back was to the door when Lady Ellingham entered, his figure betrayed nothing. In such crises a woman's aplomb is supposed to surpass a man's: she is credited with higher powers of finesse and concealment. But Rachel's inexperience was on a par with her sensibility; her being was shaken to its depths, and she could no more have faced the Countess's eyes at that moment than have flown. She could do no more than bend her hot face over the book that she had instinctively drawn towards her.

An eye much less acute than my lady's must have read the signs and perceived that she had cut short

a scene. But Lady Ellingham did not betray save by the flatness of her tone that she remarked anything out of the common.

"I have followed up my note, Miss South," she said. She paused, and then, "But I see that Mr. Girardot is with you. Perhaps, as I have something to say, he will not mind——"

"I was just going," he hastened to answer. His tone was even, though it lacked his usual sprightliness—he was not sufficiently master of himself to venture on that. "I am afraid," he threw in deftly, "that Miss South is still suffering from last evening's shock. It must have been a most trying experience."

"Yes," my lady replied coldly, "it was much to be regretted. She must be, and I trust she will be, more prudent in the future."

She had not closed the door behind her, and the tutor, unwilling as he was to leave the girl with her, had no choice but to take the hint. He said another word or two, and bowed himself out, devoutly hoping that Rachel, at whom he dared not glance, had recovered a measure of composure.

But poor Rachel was very far from being composed. She had managed to rise to her feet, and she stood with a hand on the table; and she did her best to meet her visitor's gaze. But she had not the courage to do so. Even when the door had closed behind the tutor and Lady Ellingham asked courteously if she might sit, it was in a very small voice and with cheeks still glowing that she begged her to do so.

"And pray be seated yourself, Miss South. You still look, as Mr. Girardot said, a good deal overcome. No doubt your nerves have not yet recovered from the shock. I should have come to see you last evening, but it was late when I learned the truth, and I had guests to dinner. I trust that you are not really the worse?"

Alas, Rachel's wits were still to find—she was no

intrigante, poor child, and it was only a broken, confused word of acknowledgment that she could frame.

"At any rate," Lady Ellingham continued more cordially, "you don't bear malice I hope? I am forgiven"—with a gracious movement of the head—"for my misplaced scolding? Of course, I had no idea that anything of the kind had occurred, or I should not have spoken as I did. I am told that you behaved with great courage, and were not to blame except"—this she said with a smile that drew the sting from the words—"for the imprudence of returning to the forest at so late an hour."

It was the first really kind thing that the Countess had said to her, and Rachel, a little more herself, thanked her with a grateful look. "I am sorry," she added shyly, "but I knew how much Lady Ann thought of her bracelet."

"Well," my lady answered with a smile, "you paid dearly for your error. And now, if you will be so good, I should like to hear your account. Please tell me what happened—from the beginning."

Rachel did so, lamely at first, but with growing power as she approached the crisis. She made no attempt to hide the fears that had assailed her, but she did not dwell on them, and her listener, who had approached the interview with no strong feeling in her favour, soon found herself sharing the impression which the facts had made on her brother-in-law. She began to see the girl in a new light. She admitted, with reluctance, that there was more in her than she had judged; and even owned, with her eyes on the candid, artless face, that the child had a certain power of attraction.

"Well, I think you were wonderfully brave," she replied, when she had heard all. "And I am thankful that no worse came of it—very thankful. But in future, Miss South, you must think before you act. If Captain Dunstan had not come up when he did—

and it was a million chances to one against it—I shudder to think what might have happened ! ”

Rachel agreed meekly.

“ And now, enough of that,” Lady Ellingham continued. “ You must put it away and not think of it. But ”—her tone grew sensibly more formal—“ there is a subject on which I wish to say a word to you. You must not take it amiss, Miss South, for I think it is my duty to say it. I am not finding fault with you, and I am sure that there is no ground for fault-finding, but I—I was sorry to find Mr. Girardot ”—Rachel's face flamed anew—“ with you just now. It was natural that he should come to inquire after you, and, living as he does in the house, you must meet him occasionally. But he is a very attractive young man, with some powers of pleasing and no unwillingness to use them, and ”—Lady Ellingham carefully averted her eyes from her governess—“ I think it my duty to warn you in regard to him. You will be wise, Miss South, if you see as little of him as possible. I trust that so far ”—she could not be insensible to the girl's increasing distress, even though she did not look at her—“ that so far there is nothing between you ? ”

Rachel was miserably conscious that her face betrayed her, and between resentment and a natural modesty she did not know what to say : whether to admit the truth or to refuse to answer. In the end and after a terrible pause, “ Why,” she faltered, “ do you ask me, Lady Ellingham ? ”

“ Why, Miss South ? ” The Countess's tone was sharp with surprise. “ Can you ask me ? Because in your position——”

“ But am I—because I am——” Rachel could not go on. Her voice failed her. But in those half-uttered words she voiced, as she meant to voice, the protest of her kind, of her class. Because she was what she was—a governess—was she to be shut off from the joys of youth, of womanhood, of love, of

marriage! Ay, even if they presented themselves?

Singular to say, the other woman understood her, and answered her. "No," she said, not unkindly. "No, I do not say that, though in your position peculiar discretion and prudence are expected. No. But because, as I happen to know, Mr. Girardot is not in a position to marry, and, I am confident, has no intention of marrying. If anything therefore has passed between you"—she spoke now with more feeling—"and I fear, I greatly fear from your manner that it is so, he is much, very much to blame. And for you, it is well, Miss South, that you are warned in time."

"But," Rachel protested—and there was still the note of indignation in her tone, for what right had the Countess to assume that he was deceiving her—"why—why are you so certain that—that he——"

The Countess relieved her from the difficulty of finding words. "Has he asked you to marry him?"

Rachel winced. "No," she murmured.

"Has he spoken to you of marriage?"

"No," she whispered.

"And he will not, believe me. He has no intention of doing so. And as I do not think so ill of you—indeed I think better of you, Miss South, for I see that you are not yet trained to deceive—as to believe that you are capable of listening to him on other terms, I am only doing my duty in warning you against him. You are young, younger than I thought and with less experience of the world. I give you credit for desiring to conduct yourself virtuously; your family, I am told, is respectable. I do not know what has passed between you and Mr. Girardot, but I must impress upon you"—and Lady Ellingham spoke very seriously now—"that no young girl should listen to a man, should at any rate let her feelings be known by him, until he has declared himself. That, I am confident, Mr. Girardot has not done, and will not do. And

therefore I am sure that you will see the propriety of putting an end to this—this trifling at once. Otherwise——"

But she had no need to pronounce the alternative. The mingled gravity and kindness with which she spoke broke down the girl's resistance. Rachel burst into tears, her face hidden on her arms and all attempt at disguise laid aside. "I had better go!" she sobbed, her shoulders heaving piteously. "I had better go!"

Lady Ellingham seemed to weigh the suggestion for some moments and to consider it dispassionately. But after a pause, "No," she said with deliberation. "I do not think that that is necessary. I do not want to lose you, and others may have an inkling of this. It will be wiser to stay, and by your conduct to prove both to them and to him that you respect yourself. You have been frank with me, or at least," she added with a faint smile, "as frank as I could expect; and the advice I give you, Miss South, is not only the best I can give you, but it proves my confidence in you. If I thought ill of you, it is not the advice I should give you. But I believe that now your eyes are opened you will act as self-respect dictates to you."

She stood a while, looking down with a softened face at the girl, expecting, perhaps, that she would answer. But Rachel had no strength to speak. Humiliation whelmed her like a flood; and after a moment's thought the elder woman slowly left the room. A moment later she reopened the door, but it was only to say, "Ann will not come to you to-day."

On the stairs, however, my lady paused. "I think —I think she is a good girl," she reflected. "But I wonder if I have done rightly! The man is in the house. I cannot prevent them meeting." And once she turned as if she would go back, and during that pause Rachel's lot in this world hung in the balance. But the Countess did not go back.

CHAPTER XII

IN SOCIETY

ANN sprawled in her chair with her sharp, merciless eyes fixed on her governess. "My eye," she said, "you do look a ghost, Miss South. You're not the same! You look like Ellingham when he's cut to the world! You might tell me! Tell me about the shock mother says you had! And the robbers. The bracelet was mine, and I ought to know."

"Well," Rachel replied sharply, "you will not know—at any rate in lesson-time. You will go on with your dictation. 'Ces barbares qui espéraient de surprendre la ville.'"

"I'll bet they surprised you, by gum!" Ann muttered rebelliously as, with the red tip of her tongue protruding, she languidly transcribed the sentence. "You might say they did, Miss South?"

"'Furent eux-mêmes surpris et déconcertés.'"

But Ann's pen hung idle. "Were they discon—disconcerted," she asked cunningly, "when Uncle George came up?"

"Take it down at once!" Rachel insisted, tapping the table impatiently.

"Oh, now, you know," the incurable one protested, "mother told you to be patient with me! And you are not being patient, you know! You are not the same at all. You are quite gashly. One day I thought you nearly pretty—only one day, you know," Ann added guardedly. "But now you are gashly. I hope I shall never have a shock to make me ugly."

"Go on this minute!" Rachel scolded. "Full stop. 'Les sujets d'Alceste, animés par l'exemple et par les ordres de Mentor——'"

Ann, her tongue still in evidence, penned the words reluctantly. But that done, "Give this cheek a little red," she whispered impudently. "One would not sure be gashly when one's dead! Yes?" Then, seeing that poor Rachel's thoughts had wandered and that she was not attending, "No, you're not the same at all," she said. "You're ever so different."

And alas! Ann was right. Rachel was not the same. Yesterday hopeful and innocent, a-tiptoe with the quivering sense that, within the forbidden chamber on the threshold of which she hung expectant, things unknown, but beautiful and radiant, might await her. To-day, one day older, and yet in that one day apprised —the door ajar now—that within the chamber were other things not beautiful, not glorious: pangs and aches and jealousy and disappointment—clouds that overhung and might in one moment ruin the scene.

She was changed; but not so completely changed that even with the door ajar she did not cling to the illusion—that she did not try to blind herself to the spectres, of which she now had a glimpse. And it is certain that, if Lady Ellingham had known when she paused on the stairs the direction in which the girl's thoughts would run during the next twenty-four hours, she would have retraced her steps to the schoolroom and revoked her decision.

For love is an absorbing passion, selfish, exclusive, dominating, and from the innocent heart of inexperience it is hardly to be washed by all the waters of all the seas. For the time Rachel had been overwhelmed. The painfulness of her position, and shame at hearing her heart's secret discovered in bald words —these and the authority of the elder woman had overcome and silenced her. She had been unable to resist, unable to protest. And for some hours she had

lain prostrate, crushed by the conviction that she had deceived herself, that he had but played with her and made sport of her—and that henceforth life with all its joys and colour was at an end for her.

And of course she had fancied that her heart was broken. But not many hours passed before hope began to raise its head, and with it faith in her lover. How did Lady Ellingham know? How could she know? Memory, at once painful and alluring, recalled the fervour of his voice, the glow of his eyes, the passion that had enveloped her and wrapped her in a delicious confusion—recalled above all the caress that had brushed her hair! And no! her heart cried, he was not playing with her. He was not deceiving her! He could not be. She would not believe it. He would come to her presently; he would come the moment that he could, and he would speak, and she would be happy. Yes, he would come to her. A few hours, and all would be well, and her heart would sing with joy.

And he was in the house, there was nothing to keep him from her. He might seize any opportunity, he might come at any time. And when he came she would be strong, she would let no false shame stand between them. Lady Ellingham's cruel words, her plain speaking, had stripped her of that.

Yes, he would surely, surely come! But suspense is painful, and doubt more painful still, and even while she listened to Ann's chatter she lost herself in counting the hours that had elapsed. For with every succeeding hour the question, When would he come? and presently, the question, Why did he not come? pressed more heavily upon her, began to harass her and torment her. She lived only in expectation, and was alike indifferent to Ann's pin-pricks, which did but tease the surface, and blind and deaf to the happenings about her.

For there were happenings, and a to-do in the house

that at another time would have excited her. House-maids were lighting fires and flickering in and out of rooms, footmen were pressing state-liveries, in the gun-room the head ranger was laying out his guns, and in my lady's sitting-room the cook was assuring my lady with a flushed face that she would do her justice—but *meringues à la crême* she had never heard of. Everywhere petticoats were whisking, brooms sweeping, grooms hissing, chimneys, that had not been used for months, smoking; men swearing at maids and maids snapping at men, and a mighty confusion of tongues.

For—rare event!—my lord was coming, and with him a party of friends, and there would be great doings and deep drinking and banquets and what not; was not the best wine being drawn from the cellar, and the service of plate being taken from its chest? There would be guests in hall as well as in parlour, maids and strange men, and who knew what might not come of it? Even the scullery wench whose ears the cook had boxed in her heat about the meringues, and who was even now crying over the sink, felt a lift of the heart, and an expectation of she knew not what. A servant, riding post, had brought the letter that morning, and not later than to-morrow my lord might be expected.

Mrs. Jemmett looked into the dining-room and found Bowles dressing the sideboard. He was poising a silver-gilt salver on its edge, and, satisfied with his work, glanced at her for approval. "Well, it will stir us up a bit, Mrs. J.," he said—"put a bit of life into us."

But Mrs. Jemmett did not respond. "I wish good may come of it," she said.

"Well"—after a glance at the door that assured him it was closed—"there's no knowing and no telling, ma'am, while her ladyship has the figure she has. He'll have seen no finer, no, nor face either, wherever he

has been ! But there it is, she'd put her hand in the fire before she'd let on to feel anything. It will all be as before : she'll meet him in the hall—always takes care to meet him before us, ma'am—and it'll be "Hallo, Kitty ! blooming as usual, my lady ! " and "I fear you have had a cold journey ! " from her. And no more until the parson comes drunk into the drawing-room and her ladyship sweeps out, so stiff that, damme, Mrs. J., you could hear her train crackle ! "

"Where's he coming from this time ? "

"Them Barrymores."

"By Maidenhead ? "

"Well," cautiously, "it might not be far off."

Mrs. Jemmett sniffed virtuously. "There never come no good of that lot, woman or man. I suppose my lady knows ? "

"Oh, la, yes, and very pinched about the lips when she give her orders. But there, you can't wonder : my lord's young, and there's all sorts going on there, dancing and dicing and drinking, and——"

"And worse ! " said Mrs. Jemmett severely. "I'm surprised at you, Bowles, taking his side ! " She took herself off.

Bowles spared a moment to look after her. "Ah, woman, woman ! " he said, shaking his head sapiently. "They sticks together, and there's where they has it over us."

But to Rachel all this meant little ; and less as the hours passed and that which she expected, that which she had so fondly, so confidently expected, did not happen. With ears ever on the stretch for the squeak of the baize door, her heart hungered for the step that she knew so well. A sound, no matter what, and the blood flew to her face. But he did not come, and her heart grew hour by hour more sick with hope deferred. And gradually a feeling which was not far from resentment began to stir within her. That day

passed, and the night, and half of the next day ; and, though her heart pleaded a hundred excuses for him, it was impossible to think that he had not opportunities, that he could not fly to her side if he wished to fly, that he could not come if he wished to come. Why did he keep away from her if he was true ?

Then, about noon on the third day, when her heart was very low indeed, and she was moping with a pale face, pretending to occupy herself she knew not how, a message was brought to her, and she learned that after all Lord Ellingham's coming was to be something to her.

"If you please, miss, her ladyship desires you will be in the drawing-room after dinner this evening," Priscilla announced, her eyes big with her message, "as her ladyship's alone."

"Alone ?" Rachel exclaimed, taken aback.

"As there's no other ladies, miss."

She was very miserable, but she was young, and the prospect offered a change. Still it was but sadly and slowly that she went about her preparations for the new scene, getting out the white muslin and the black sash—the blue sash she had no heart to wear ; and she sighed often. She was almost glad that her glass reflected a pale, woebegone face. To the new experience that lay immediately before her she told herself that she was worse than indifferent, that it held neither hope nor fear for her. What mattered it how she looked !

But as she descended the grand staircase that evening, a little slender figure with brooding eyes and hair too heavy for her small head, she found that this was not so. She discovered that she still had nerves. The hall with its hurrying servants, and the murmur of voices behind closed doors, increased the feeling ; and when she crept into the reception-rooms which she had hardly entered since the day after her arrival, and saw their stately length lit by innumerable wax

candles, their two fires burning in silence, and the glitter and splendour of the uncovered furniture, shyness grew into awe. She seated herself on a low chair in a modest place beyond the farther hearth, and sank under the sense of her insignificance. She was nothing in this great house—nothing to him, nothing to anyone !

For half an hour she sat alone, and no sound except the crackling of a burning log broke the long, vacant splendour of the room. Then a door opened without, she caught a burst of laughter, the hum of voices. A servant threw wide the door of the room in which she sat, and my lady swept in, proud, superb, impassive.

Nevertheless, Lady Ellingham's first action belied her looks and surprised the watcher. She paused before a mirror and deliberately, almost scornfully, surveyed herself. Apparently she was not satisfied, though to Rachel's eyes she looked gloriously handsome. She set a curl straight, pressed home a comb, raised her dress a trifle on one shoulder. Then she glided on, acknowledged Rachel's curtsy by an unsmiling nod and, taking up a book, she seated herself at some distance from the girl. "You had better find a book," she said, and dropping her eyes on the page before her, she became lost in thought.

An hour, a long tedious hour passed, while the girl now wondered impatiently why she had been summoned, now relapsed into her own sad reflections. Then at last a tumult of voices burst forth, scattered steps crossed the hall, and a crowd of men—a crowd it seemed to Rachel, who knew none of them—streamed into the room. A young dandy, flushed, bright-eyed and confident, led the way ; in his ear an older man, tall, dark, spare, buttoned-up, dropped the last word of some cynical tale. A second dandy, stouter and more full-blown, followed, and behind him a parson, moist-eyed and red about the gills, was urged in by the last-comer, on whom Rachel, guessing that this

was Lord Ellingham, bent her attention. She was curious to divine what he was like, of whom such strange things had been hinted, and involuntarily she liked his looks. His handsome face—he appeared to be little above thirty—wore some of the marks of dissipation, but they were not yet stamped deeply upon it, and his smile was boyish, quizzical, kindly. To judge by it he found the present situation droll. He had a little the air of a bad boy who had misbehaved and awaits the result of a naughty trick, with more interest in the event than fear of the results.

The men who entered first moved over to Lady Ellingham—a little diffidently and uncertainly, Rachel thought. But the girl ceased to notice them. Her attention was caught by an exclamation that fell from the parson. "Damme, who's the filly?" he hiccoughed. "I didn't know that you kept a——"

My lord silenced him with something like an oath, and pushed him away towards the pianoforte. "There, you are safest there!" he said, dropping a laughing eye on Rachel. "Go, sing, canary, sing!"

"We're good boys to-night," the young dandy began, pulling out the ruffle of his shirt, and addressing Lady Ellingham. "The landlord whipped us in, and George cut off the skirters." His eyes travelled to Rachel, inspected her and returned. They fell on my lady's book. "That's *Castle Rackrent*, I bet a penny! Know the cover. See it everywhere. Monstrous good book!"

"A remarkable book for a girl to write," Lady Ellingham said.

"In her thirties," corrected the tall, spare man. "Father's a bore, a confounded bore—'pon my honour, insufferable!" He had taken his stand with his back to the fire, and was calmly appraising "the filly."

By this time my lord had got the parson to the piano, and he left him and strolled up to the others. His

eyes met Rachel's and he gave her a smiling nod, but did not approach her. "Good boys all, Kitty," he said. "Best behaviour, this evening."

"But—the nearer the church, the farther from her ladyship!" murmured Colonel Ould, the man on the hearth, with a glance at the clergyman, who was fumbling with the music.

The dandy laughed. "I'm not sure that I ought not to be in a middle-hell," he said, with a smothered hiccough. He was little more than a boy.

"Perhaps safer to sit down," said the Colonel.

"Yes, sit down, Bobbie," my lord said, and seizing him by the shoulders pressed him into a chair. "Now, Filmer," to the parson, "pipe up! When the tea comes——"

"It will mend the man but spoil the voice!" said Ould.

"Meantime, my lady, give us some credit," my lord continued, looking whimsically at Rachel, it might be, to see how she took the conversation. "Ah! Here comes George at last! Bad boy, wouldn't leave his bottle!"

"You be hanged!" said the Captain. "Kitty knows better! Hallo!" He turned about, standing with his hands in his pockets and viewing the parson at the piano. "Can he sing?"

"Better when he's cut than when he's sober!"

"Ay, but what will he sing?"

"Perhaps the young lady will play for him," Ould suggested. As he spoke he took a seat by Lady Ellingham, turning a shoulder on the rest of the company. "The governess? Indeed? Is she?" he said, raising his eyebrows. "I was wondering."

"What?"

"Whether your ladyship was guarding the young lady, or the young lady was playing sheep-dog to your ladyship."

"If there are wolves," the Countess said negligently,

"I do not think that they are wearing their own skins, Colonel Ould. At any rate, I do not deem their teeth very formidable."

Lord Robert—he was the young dandy—overheard the answer and giggled, but his laugh was lost in the first notes of a fine tenor voice. Not for nothing was the parson dubbed "the Canary."

"Yes, loving is a painful thrill,
And not to love more painful still.
But, oh, it is the worst of pain
To love and not be loved again!"

The words chimed in so unpleasantly with the secret thoughts of two of his listeners that they might have been painfully affected if the singer had not become maudlin with the last line. His head drooped over the keys in a manner so absurd that even Lady Ellingham joined in the laughter that rewarded him. "Go on, dear dying duck!" cried Bobbie. "Put the tears into it!"

"Affection now has fled from earth,
Nor fire of genius, noble birth,
Nor heavenly virtue can beguile
From beauty's cheek one favouring smile."

But at that point the singer broke down altogether and wept real tears. "Too, too touching!" he maundered. "Too touching!"

"Too, too full!" said the Captain bluntly. "But thank heaven it's no worse. Lord knows what he might have sung!" And as the procession bearing tea came in, he moved across to Rachel.

"All taut again, eh, Miss South! Shipshape and none the worse, I hope?" he said.

Rachel, aware that all eyes were on her, murmured shyly that she was none the worse.

"Well, it was the devil of an adventure!" returned the Captain. "They nearly cut you out, by gad!"

"An adventure?" Lord Robert cried, pricking up

his ears. "What was it? And who was the knight-errant?"

"Well, luckily for Miss South, he was not a carpet knight, Bobbie, like you."

"Oh, that's not fair!" replied Bobbie, unabashed. "But come, I say, let us hear the adventure!"

Lady Ellingham interposed. "Another time," she said. "Spare us who have heard it. Miss South, will you make the tea?" And Rachel, perforce and with a flushed face, rose and went to the side-table.

Lord Robert, however, was not to be put off. "I'm a great hand at holding the cups," he lisped, and he rose to follow. But my lord cheerily thrust him down in his seat again.

"You'll have enough to do to carry your own!" he said, and himself followed Rachel to the table. He stood smiling down at her. "Find Ann a handful?" he said, bridging in a moment the distance between them, and speaking as if he had known her all his life.

"I do, rather," she murmured.

"Regular bag of tricks, eh! Calls me Ellingham, and the other day, because she did not win at speculation, threw the cards in my face. I ought to have spanked her," he continued, with his eyes on the little head bent shyly over the teapot. "But no doubt she'll be growing wings now. Heard all sorts of good things of you, Miss South—from George, you know."

She looked up, and he saw that she did not understand.

"My brother," he explained. "Your knight-errant, you know," he added, with a mischievous smile.

"Oh, I didn't——" But she did not finish her sentence. Her glance in falling from his face caught Lady Ellingham's eyes, and Lady Ellingham was looking at her with so odd, so hard an expression, that it startled her. "I will take Lady Ellingham her tea," she said, rising hurriedly.

"No, that's my business. Or, here, Bobbie! Take

Kitty her tea if you are steady enough ! No, parson, no," as Filmer, hazy and stuttering, wavered up to the tea-board and stood regarding the two with roguish eyes. " You are a cup too full. Sheer off, man, and find another port, as George would say."

But the parson was too far gone to take a hint, however broad. He goggled at them. " 'Nother little lady, eh ? 'Nother pretty lady ! And my lady looking this way ! Oh, fie, fie ! "

" Sink it, you d—d fool ! " my lord said in another tone.

" Oh ! oh ! " Mr. Filmer raised his hands in tipsy reprehension. " Mustn't swear before the cloth ! Bad—bad form ! "

" Miss South !" my lady's clear, cold voice rose above the murmur, " if you have had your tea, I think we will——" She rose without completing the sentence.

Colonel Ould rose also, looking anything but pleased. He had flattered himself that he was making himself agreeable to the Countess, and he ventured to remonstrate. " Don't—don't be so cruel ! " he said in a low tone. " Won't you stay ten minutes more, ma'am ? " Then, seeing that she persisted, and with a glance at the group about the tea-table, " Oh, I see," he continued, in the same low tone and with a meaning smile. " I see ! Too bad ! Really too bad ! Incorrigible ! "

If my lady understood the insinuation she betrayed it only by the depth of her curtsy and the coldness of her look. She disengaged herself, gathered up Rachel by a gesture, and, with a chilly word or two as she passed the other men, she swept from the room.

And thus closed, rather abruptly, Rachel's first evening in society.

Three hours later in another room the men were breaking up. On a table, amid lights that had burned down to the sockets, lay dice and casters and a medley of glasses. The parson snored heavily on a couch, his neckcloth loosened and one arm dangling to the floor.

Captain Dunstan was busy lighting candles at a side-table. The other men stood here and there, yawning and waiting for them. "Neat little girl!" said Ould thoughtfully. "Eh, Fred?"

"A d—d plucky little girl!" the Captain struck in. And, while they stood about, he told the story of the bracelet.

"Then you are first in the field, George," Ould commented. "A good thing too," he went on, with a look at "the landlord." "Take it from me, Fred, you should never have 'em in the house. Never does, master and maid. By the way, have you got that handsome boy-switcher still?"

"Girardot? Yes, you'll see him to-morrow. Why?" Lord Ellingham asked, rather shortly.

"Well, if I were you I wouldn't keep him either. Same principle—never does."

"Why?"

"Why? Why, too good-looking by half to have about the place. Nature abhors a—you know the rest. True old tag, though we learned it at school. I'd see his back if I were you!"

"Why?" It was the Captain who this time asked the question, and he thrust himself forward rather roughly.

"Why?" Ould answered, with a yawn. "Before harm comes of it. He might"—with an ugly smile—"Oh, he might cut you out with the little filly, George!" But that was not what he had had in his mind.

And the Captain knew that it was not, and said so. "I don't believe you meant that!" he said.

"Oh, let's have no brabbling!" my lord struck in good-humouredly. "We can none of us count the candles or say Meso—Mesopotamia! To bed! To bed! Who'll see the parson to his downy?"

The Captain volunteered, and the party, with some hugging of the door-posts, steered their way up the stairs and along the passages.

CHAPTER XIII

IT would be vain to deny that the glimpse of another life that she had enjoyed had to some extent distracted Rachel's thoughts from her own troubles; it would be equally vain to say that the command which Lady Ellingham had issued, as she ascended the stairs, that the girl should appear the next evening, did not divert her mind. But between times—and never had time passed more slowly—Rachel succumbed to the old spell. She felt her heart leap with every footfall that passed the swing-door—and passed it, alas! only to tantalize her. She pined, she sickened with hopes ever thwarted. And though with the passage of each hour expectation sank lower, and a wholesome resentment, pricked into life by pride and self-respect, began to stir within her, Girardot's image still dominated, still possessed her.

For only now, when she sat alone and neglected, did she understand how large a part in her life from day to day, in her anticipations from morrow to morrow, the tutor had played. Only now did she grasp what feelings new and powerful he had awakened in her, how closely he had wound himself about her heart, how strong a spell his handsome face, his gay laugh, his voice, now tender, now teasing, had cast over her fancy!

She was a fool—oh, she was a fool: she told herself so a hundred times. But, alas! she knew now that she was also a woman. She was pale, languid, and heavy-eyed, caring for one thing only, and so low in

energy that to attend to Ann was like heaving an immense weight from the ground. She vowed that, were she once sure, once certain that he meant nothing, that he was but playing with her, she could pluck him from her heart. But in the silence and solitude of the schoolroom she was not sure even of that. She shrank before the grey, monotonous, dreary prospect of a life, a long life, spent without him.

Still, when she descended to the drawing-room on this second evening, resentment had made some way with her—for how could she, how could he explain his silence, his avoidance? The wounded dove will peck and the wounded heart will turn—though feebly; and Rachel had, girl as she was, a spirit. She had taken care to descend later than on the previous evening, and she found Lady Ellingham already in the room and to all appearance absorbed in a book. Taking the hint, Rachel, stole softly to a chair, and opened the volume that she had brought with her, and for some minutes silence reigned. But presently, happening to raise her eyes, she saw her companion's face reflected in a mirror, and with a tremor—for she could fancy on what my lady's thoughts turned—she perceived that she was being inspected. She dropped her eyes to her book, but the attraction was irresistible—there had been something dark and magnetic in the other's eyes; presently she had to look again. Her ladyship was still at gaze, but this time she seemed to think it necessary to speak.

"You look pale, Miss South," she said. "Are you not well?"

"I have a slight headache," Rachel confessed, though indeed, had she spoken truly, she had said heartache. "It is nothing, thank you."

"I hope that nothing more has occurred to disturb you?"

"Oh, no," Rachel answered. "Nothing." But she coloured, and in her embarrassment she longed for the

door across the hall to open, longed to hear the hum of voices, the riotous entry that would release her from scrutiny.

But it was without warning or sound that the door did open a minute later. It opened, and *he* came in, and in a moment the pride, of which she had begun to despair—so little had it aided her—came to her succour. The heart, that for an instant beat so tumultuously that it threatened to choke her, steadied itself, and she raised her eyes to meet his, marvelling at her self-possession. It helped her a little that the tutor did not at once discover her presence. He took the Countess to be alone, and he moved towards her with a smile—a smile that hardened the girl in her resentment—on his face.

"In season, dear lady, I trust?" he said gaily. "And neither too early nor too late? I fancy the company are only at their second——" There he broke off. He had become aware of Rachel, his eyes had travelled to her, and something in her face or in the silence of the room struck home to him, so that even his aplomb failed him. Then, "Oh, I did not know," he explained with a laugh a little forced. "I flattered myself that I should be the single swallow. And I see that it is already summer."

"If Miss South makes a summer?"

He had spoken the first glib words that occurred to him, without thought of their implications. He saw now that he must follow them up, and with an attempt at his usual tone, "I will not be so bold"—he rejoined, with a bow— "as to say who makes the summer."

Lady Ellingham's eyes were bright with mischief. "No? Really? Then you do not decide between us? I am not sure, Miss South, which of us should feel the more flattered."

"I think," Rachel said, and she wondered at her own calmness, "that your ladyship uses the right word."

The Countess returned the ball. "Dear me," she replied. "You don't say so? You really surprise me, Miss South! You speak as if you did not credit Mr. Girardot with meaning all the fine things that he says to us."

He knew, and he had known from the first, that between the two he was in an awkward position; for who can court two women to their faces? And no doubt he cursed the unlucky impulse that had led him to enter before the diners. But he had to make the best of it, and, "Oh, but," he protested lightly, though for once he coloured, "Miss South, I am sure, knows me better than that."

"Better than I do, you mean?" my lady said.

"Well, if not so long——"

"No, not so long," my lady assented, smiling always. "That is true. And perhaps not so well. But still well enough to put a true value, it seems, on the coinage you mint. Now I wonder, Miss South, whether he ever calls you 'dear lady'? If so, that, I can assure you, means nothing."

"Nothing?" he protested, striving stoutly to rally. "Oh, don't say that! Rather the most respectful, the most sincere homage, dear lady."

"Nothing but a compliment, Miss South. It cannot," my lady's voice hardened slightly, "since he often uses it to me, and so it can mean no more. He uses it as——"

"As he uses painted quills sometimes," Rachel said, with a coolness that was an immeasurable surprise to herself.

"Painted quills!" Lady Ellingham exclaimed. She was puzzled. For the first time, and not understanding, she turned her bantering eyes from him, and looked at the governess.

"Lady Ann is not yet open to flattery," Rachel explained. Her courage, her pose, were a continuing amazement to herself.

The Countess laughed. "Oh, I see. Very clever of you, Miss South! Very clever! Of course! I forgot that Ann was also of the sex and open to attack."

Baited by both he tried to fall back on his mock-serious tone. "So this is your gratitude," he exclaimed, addressing Rachel. "Oh, ma'am, for shame! When I remember how many easy mornings, how much good behaviour, I purchased with those quills, how many days of prunes and prisms I bought for you——"

But my lady broke in. "I see! I see!" she cried. "Then doubtless I too was beside the target! And his compliments to me and his gifts to Ann were alike for your benefit, Miss South?"

"I am infinitely obliged to him," Rachel said. But her heart was beginning to melt. What a return, oh, what a return she was making to him!

"And no more?" the Countess rejoined in mock surprise. "No more than that?"

"No, no more," Rachel said steadily, but the effort was almost too much for her. "Though I must admit," —what devil of ingratitude was speaking in her stead? —"that he also mended a great many pens for us."

The Countess laughed. "Now, Mr. Girardot! Now, it is your turn. Say something about the ingratitude of the fair, will you? It seems to me that it would be appropriate."

But for once the tutor, who was wont to be so self-possessed, had nothing to say. He could only look foolish. And it was Rachel who with desperate audacity—but the pride that had suffered seemed to take possession of her, and to oust her will—it was Rachel who took the word, and gave the *coup de grâce*. "Oh, but I forgot," she said. "He has also pressed my hand, Lady Ellingham. I believe that I ought to have been offended, though I knew that it was but a compliment. But you came into the room at the moment and Mr. Girardot——"

"Went out!" Lady Ellingham cried, and she

laughed softly. "Oh, Mr. Girardot, you naughty, naughty philanderer! Do, Miss South, look at him! He is positively blushing, and no wonder! Compliments, quills, and hand-pressings—and Ann his only conquest!"

He was indeed utterly out of countenance, for the impudent when abashed are the most abashed; and unable to relieve his feelings by the oath that rose to his lips, the tutor could maintain his easy tone no longer. "Your ladyship is pleased to amuse yourself," he said with an air of offence. His vanity was wounded to the quick.

"But haven't we all been amusing ourselves?" she asked innocently. "Except Ann. Of course, I forgot Ann. And didn't you come in this evening to amuse me, had I been alone, Mr. Girardot? As it is, and Miss South being with me, you have amused us both, as was right."

There was bitter meaning in his next words. "Certainly, it is long since I have heard your ladyship laugh as much," he said. "And Miss South does not laugh now."

Rachel dropped her eyes to her book. Oh, what had she done and what—what demon of pride had driven her to it? But as she had begun so she must finish, though it pierced her heart to wound him further. And, thus challenged, she looked up, she met his eyes. "No, Mr. Girardot," she said soberly. "I do not laugh because—the game was new to me. I did not at once comprehend it and I was a little out of my depth. Lady Ellingham, however, has been good enough to give me a lesson, and I now understand the rules. But it is a game," her voice trembled, "I do not care to play, and perhaps"—ah, was she casting away her last hope, her last chance of happiness?—"perhaps for the future you will kindly confine the quills, sir, to Ann—who does appreciate them."

"Brava!" said her ladyship—but she too spoke

more gravely. "Now as to Miss South you have fair warning, sir. I, on the contrary, am an old player, and you may call me 'dear lady' as often as you think proper and always with the proviso that it means respectful homage—that I think was the term you used! But for the rest—Oh dear, here they come and we must be serious again."

But it was only the Captain, whose approach she had heard, and he entered, looking a little flushed and shamefaced. He cast a sharp glance at the three and nodded to Lady Ellingham. "Better pipe below, Kitty!" he said. "And go to bed. They are fairly settled down to it, and when they come out——" He shrugged his shoulders, and left the rest to be understood.

The Countess raised her eyebrows. "Thank you," she said. "It is like you, no one else would have thought of us. Miss South, you are released. Good night. Mr. Girardot, I think my fan is on that table. Will you look? No, it must be on the other. Is it not there? One moment, if you please." She searched. "Oh, yes, I have it. Good night."

When the two had retired—severally and not together, she had seen to that—"What was afoot?" the Captain asked. "I thought that Master Girardot looked a little queer. What was it, eh?"

"Oh, not much," my lady said wearily. "Nothing of importance. We have been holding a court and convicting an offender. But I wish—I wish I understood that girl. She has a command of herself that—that's not natural, if she is as young and innocent as she seems. I can't make her out. Sometimes I like her, and sometimes I doubt her."

"Well, I don't think she is a common kind of craft."

"No, I agree. She is clever; so clever and so demure with it, that who is to say, George, what she is? She may be deceiving us all the time."

"Oh, tell that to the Marines!" he answered. "I

thought you had got that notion out of your head, Kitty."

"But last night I noticed that he——"

"Pooh, pooh! A pretty face and a new one!"

"But," she asked with simplicity, "has she a pretty face?"

"If you ask me," he replied bluntly, "no! Stand beside her and look in the glass, my dear, if you want to know."

"But Lord Robert seemed to be taken with her!"

"Bobbie? Bobbie would flirt with a petticoat hung on the anchor-fluke, if it was new to him! As for that little baggage, well, she is but a child after all. The real point is—Fred! You are wronging him, my lady, and I tell you so! You are wronging him, Kitty. He is bad enough God knows, but not bad enough for what you suspect, and for heaven's sake get it out of your head! And wear a smooth face to-morrow. This shall not occur again if I can help it, and it is not altogether Fred's fault. He can't stop the bottle in the company he's in."

She shrugged her shoulders. "It's a company of his own choosing," she said, her face sombre.

CHAPTER XIV

ANNA FURENS

THE morning found Rachel listless and heart-weary. She had played out the game that pride had dictated to her, and she had won back her self-respect if, she thought bitterly, it were worth winning back. She had punished her lover—if he were indeed her lover! But twice in the course of dressing she gave way to passionate fits of weeping, and, as she remembered the return that she had made to him, and what he must now be thinking of her, she writhed in torment. But since there is to all feeling a limit, a gloomy apathy presently supervened and gradually took the place of the fever that had consumed her.

And certainly it was on a world in sympathy with her dark thoughts, that having set out the books and marked the place in *Télémaque*—hateful work—she gazed from the window as she awaited Ann's coming. The sky was leaden, the sward beneath it brown and frost-bitten. The stately oaks that in the summer had raised majestic heads of foliage and ruled each its space of verdure, now stood naked and far apart, swept by the cutting wind that rustled through the beds of dead fern. Gnarled thorns that had seen generations of hunters pass beneath them, preached from a hundred bristling points the lesson of stark endurance in a hard world. And Rachel shivered as she gazed. It was so that she saw life this morning; grey, cheerless, stretching far and lonely, its bourne

lost in mist. She longed to be alone to weep her fill, to wash away with bitter tears the remembrance of her cruelty and ingratitude.

That could not be. For here, noisy, tumultuous, racing along the passage, came the children ; not Ann only, but her brother. They burst in, the boy leading and capering in triumph. "I'm to shoot!" he shouted. "Hurrah! I'm to shoot! I'm to shoot with the party."

"Then I'm going too!" the girl retorted jealously, and fell upon him, beating him with her hood. Evidently the battle had been joined below, and she was in her most truculent mood. "You don't go without me!"

"You! You are a Jenny!" he taunted, putting the table between them and still dancing up and down. "Girls don't shoot. What would you do with a gun? You are only a Jenny! She is not going with us, is she, Miss South?"

Before Rachel could speak Ann rushed at him and he fled round the table, throwing down a chair. Rachel tried in vain to part them and only succeeded when Ann stopped out of breath. "Miss South!" she gasped, "say that I am to go. I am to go too, ain't I?"

"If your mother wishes you to go, certainly."

"But she doesn't!" the boy retorted. "She says you'd be in the way, silly, and of course you would. You are only a girl!"

"Lord Bodmin, you are very rude!" Rachel said severely. "But that is enough, Ann. If your mother does not wish you to go, of course you cannot. Come, it is ten o'clock." She picked up the fallen chair and set it at the table. "Let us be sensible and get to work."

But Ann thrust the chair away. "I shan't! I shan't!" she declared passionately. "I shan't do a word of work!"

"Ann! For shame!"

"It's not fair! It's not fair!" Ann cried, her voice quivering. "If he's to go——"

"There, cry-baby!" the boy retorted. He was not ill-natured and he was fond of his sister, but he was uplifted by his promotion; while the girl discerned perhaps, if only dimly, that here was the parting of the ways, that here began the elevation of the boy above the girl. At any rate, the taunt was barely uttered before Ann snatched up a book. "Oh, you toad!" she cried, and would have flung it in his face.

Fortunately Rachel seized her hand and wrested the book from her. "Enough!" she said angrily—she, too, heaven help her, had not much patience to spare this morning. "I will not have this! You cannot always do what your brother does, Ann. He is a boy and you are a girl. Be silent! And you," to the boy, "go at once! When you are gone——"

Bodmin with a defiant whoop turned to the door. But the prospect of defeat was too much for Ann. She also made a dart towards the door, and if Rachel had not shut it and set her back to it, both would have escaped. "Ann!" she said, beside herself. "You must not be disobedient. You shall not go," as the girl tugged furiously at the handle. "If you behave like this I must go to your mother! And you are only keeping your brother——"

"I want to keep him!" Ann panted vengefully. "I want to keep him! Oh, you beast!" And she tried to strike him across Rachel.

"Lady Ann!"

"You beast! You beast!"

"You naughty wicked girl!" Rachel cried, appalled by the passion that turned the child, with her black brows and inky mane, into a fury. "For shame, you wicked child! Do you hear me? Leave the door this instant and go to your place!"

Ann went before the word was out of Rachel's mouth.

but it was only to seize a book from the table and hurl it recklessly at her brother's face. A second followed, and she had the inkstand in her hand and was in the act of flinging it when Rachel, beside herself at the scene, seized her wrist and wrested the missile from her. Even that was at the cost of half the ink which flew out not only over the table but over her frock.

"There!" said the boy dispassionately. "Now you have done it, you silly! That's what comes of your rages!"

The taunt was too much. The child turned on Rachel, who still held her by the wrist, and with her free hand and all her strength she struck her in the face.

Rachel thought afterwards of several things that she might have done and ought to have done. To go straight to the Countess with the mark on her cheek was one of them. But what she did, overwrought as she was, was none of these things. She turned away, covered her face with her hands, and burst into a passion of tears.

The result was a tense silence, broken only by the boy's horrified, "Well, Ann!"

For a moment Rachel sobbed, unable to control herself. "I must go!" she whispered to herself. "I must go. This the end!"

"No, I am hanged if it is!" a harsh voice replied. She had not heard the door open, nor was she aware that it had opened. Then "You little whelp!" the same voice continued. "No, you don't go! You ought to be whipped—whipped till you come to your senses! Two dozen would do you good, you spiteful baggage! Strike an officer on duty, would you? Down on your marrowbones this minute, miss, and beg Miss South's pardon! Down on your knees, or I will twist your ear off, you little vixen!"

A cry of pain. Then, "I won't! I won't!" Ann shrieked.

"You will or——"

But this was too much for Rachel. "Don't! Don't hurt her. Please! Please!" she wailed. But she had not the courage to turn and disclose the smarting patch on her cheek. She was utterly humiliated by what had passed. It proved her to be so unfit, so hopelessly unfit for her position. It meant failure, failure the most mortifying. She could never control, never hope to control the child after this.

"Hurt her?" the Captain replied grimly. "But I am going to hurt her if she does not at once——"

"No, no!" Rachel pleaded, suppressing her tears. "It will be of no use. I pray you won't," she begged. "Please—please don't hurt her. It was my fault. I am not fit to—I must go."

He seemed to hesitate, but there was no diminution of anger in his tones when he spoke. "Well, you little savage," he said at last, "go then! But first you listen to me, miss! You are in Coventry now! I'll have no tiger-cat for niece of mine, and I don't speak to you until I have heard that you've gone down on your knees and begged Miss South's pardon. I wouldn't touch such a little savage with the toe of my boot! And you, Master George, you are the cause of this rumpus, I'll bet. I came up to fetch you. But you don't shoot to-day, my lad. I shall see your father about that. Nor until this little she-cat comes to her senses, mind you. You're both in fault, I know! Now go!" harshly. "Go out, both of you. My hands tingle to box your heads off! Go! Out at once! Both of you!"

Rachel heard dragging steps across the floor, a tearful sniff, which, she had no doubt, proceeded from the boy, she heard the door close. She dared not turn to make sure that Captain Dunstan had gone with them, but she hoped desperately that he had. She shrank from meeting his eyes.

But he had not gone. A moment and he broke the

silence in a tone almost as harsh as that in which he had scolded the offenders. "Well, you can't say, ma'am, that I didn't warn you," he said. "I told you what a stubborn little toad she was, and by Jove she is! I told you that you'd never manage her. She wants a boatswain's mate with a rope's end behind her. And you, God bless me, you're only a thread-paper!"

"No," Rachel said, trying to steady her voice. "I —I ought not to have come. But I didn't know. And now," she faltered with a sob that she could not stifle, "I must go. I am no use after this."

"Oh, well, it never does to be beaten. It's bad, d—d bad for her. Worse for her than for you. Must think of that after all. What started the rumpus?"

"Her brother teased her and she took up the ink-stand," Rachel explained, furtively drying her eyes, "to throw at him. And I caught her hand and took it from her and she——"

"Yes," with a chuckle, "I saw the rest—and heard it. And instead of boxing her ears till she could not see—you give up, ma'am, and cry!"

"I couldn't! Indeed I couldn't!" Rachel said weakly.

"Well, I don't know that you could," he admitted grudgingly. "For I'm hanged if I don't think Ann is the bigger of the two. And a pretty mess she has made," with disgust. "Ink all over the place, confound her!" She fancied that he was busying himself mopping it up, and perforce she turned.

"I will get a cloth," she said meekly. She took one from a cupboard.

"That's better," he said, and thought to himself, though he seemed hardly to glance at her, that he had never seen such a pathetic little face. "Here! That book is spoiled, anyway. I'd hang it round her neck and make her wear it for a week, and perhaps my young lady would learn to keep her hands off inkpots —and her governess. Do you do that——"

Rachel shook her head. "It's too late now," she said.

"You do as I say. Do you hear?"

"You—you've been very kind," she replied despondently, "but I must see Lady Ellingham and tell her."

"I'll tell her. You can leave that to me. And do you do as I say when Ann comes to you. Trounce the little vixen well. Show her that you are her master, and will stand no nonsense."

"But I'm not her master. And I am sure that she will not come."

"She will or I don't know her. I'll see to that. She's not all bad, though she has a devil of a temper. She's spoiled and her worst side is outside. But she's a streak of good in her and her mother thinks her more manageable since you've been here. I suppose you know that?" He looked sharply at her.

"No," Rachel said, much surprised. "I did not."

"Well, do you just rig the gratings," which was Dutch to his listener, "and stand by, and I'll see that she comes aboard. I must go now, they are waiting for me. I'll deal with Ann, and if she does not bend her stiff little neck to-day I'll see that she does to-morrow! And for God's sake, young lady," he urged with rough impatience, "don't go peaking and puling like a baby."

He stalked out, but was hardly gone before Rachel had an idea and flew after him. She overtook him at the baize door. "Oh," she stammered, "if you please, will you let Lord Bodmin shoot? He was not much in fault and——"

"Let him shoot?" the Captain retorted. "No, ma'am, I'm hanged if I do! Don't you know that that will hit the girl harder than anything? No, by gad, discipline! Discipline first! Master George must smart like the rest of us! I'll bet that you are smarting

for your part in it!" And for the first time he met her eyes, a gleam of humour in his own.

Rachel winced and coloured, but she had not to suffer long. The Captain turned and hurried down the great staircase. She went back to the schoolroom, sat down and sighed.

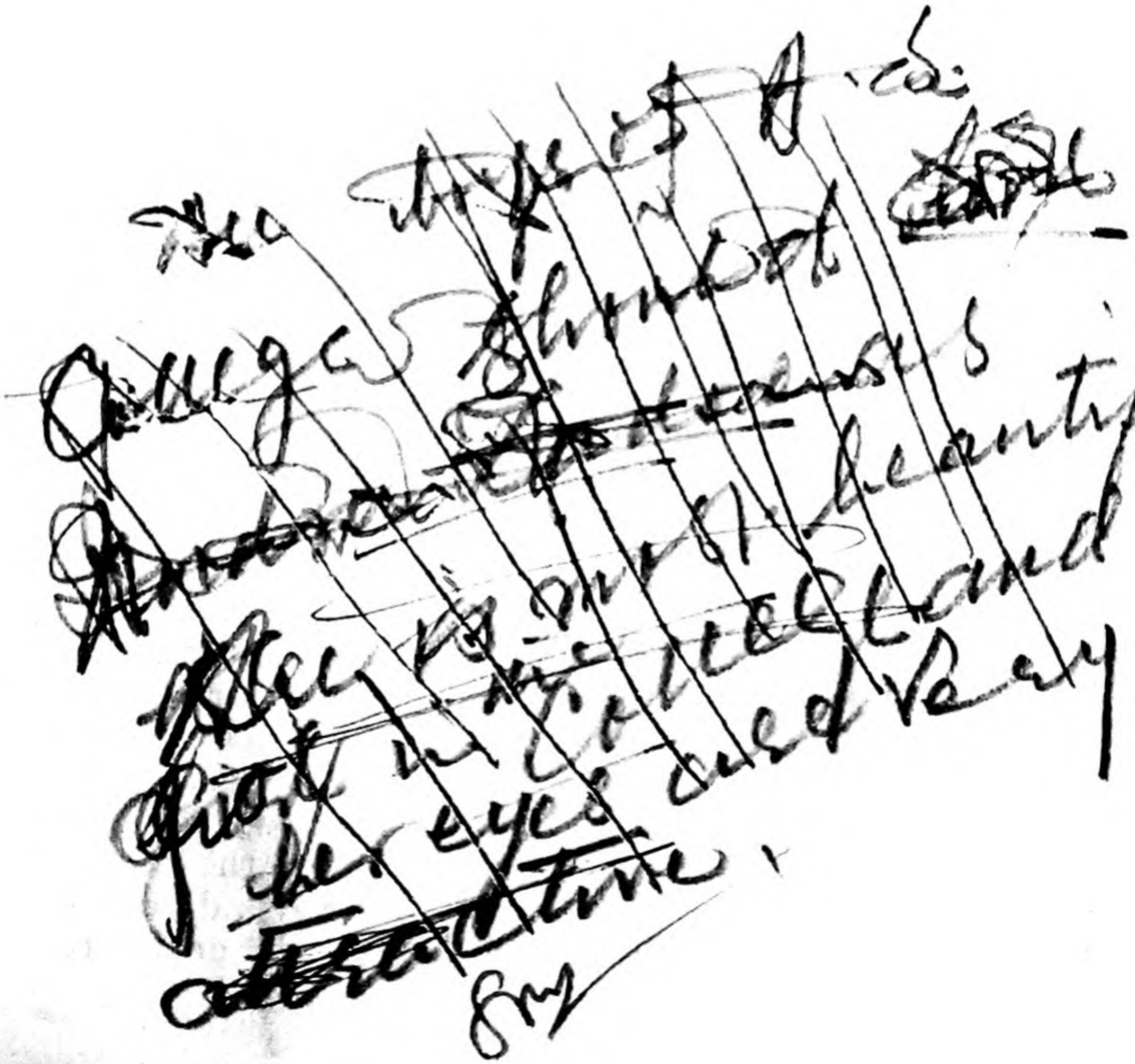
Still the catastrophe had switched her thoughts for the moment off her deeper trouble, and for a while it was rather on what Captain Dunstan had done and said that her mind turned. He had displayed an amount of common sense that surprised her, but would have surprised her less, had she been aware of the responsibilities that in those days of war fell upon young shoulders. His advice had not been rendered more palatable by the rough words with which he had seasoned it; and Rachel was far from understanding him, for in her ignorance she had no conception of the hardships of the cockpit and the midshipman's berth into which he had been flung a mere child, or of the years of lonely command and responsibility for the lives of hundreds which had tempered the man to what he was. She did not understand him because she did not know his past, his early struggles, his later success, the trials that had proved him. But she did feel that, lacking much, he had meant to be kind.

At the same time she was sure that Ann would not surrender and that the end would be the same. She could hope, indeed, for no other end. She would take her wounded spirit and her wretched story of vanity and weakness away with her and would hide her head in her home. There she might forget *him*—it was all that was left for her to do.

She thought herself the most unhappy creature on earth, and told herself too that she could have borne it better if she had not stooped to wound *him*; if she had not wreaked her wretched pride at his expense, who, after all, had done so much for her, had been so helpful, so good to her! It was that—that which now

most of all cut her to the heart and, rankling, tortured her. For possibly if she had been more patient, more trusting—but it was too late, too late to think of that now!

Presently, looking languidly from the window, she saw a sight that drew from her a pang of sympathy, and with it a feeble smile. For she discovered that she had a fellow-sufferer. The Captain had been as good as his word. Bodmin, the image of disconsolate idleness, lounged and loitered, before the house, sullenly beating the trunk of a tree with a switch, and at odds with himself and all the world. It needed no stretch of fancy to understand that he too considered himself the most unhappy of beings.



CHAPTER XV

INTERCESSION

SLEEP is Nature's reaction after grief, and Rachel to her surprise, slept long and soundly that night and next day awoke not only refreshed, but with the tiniest germ of hope re-sown in her breast. She did not know what she expected and assured herself that she expected nothing. But youth is powerful, and change possible, and there was a stir and bustle in the house—for more guests had arrived—that penetrated through the swing-door and reached even the schoolroom.

But one thing fell out as she had foreseen. Ten o'clock came but no Ann; and now she had to make up her mind what she would do. She watched the minute hand move slowly towards the quarter past, and she felt—though the decision was momentous, and tried her sorely now that she had to act—that she could no longer defer the task of seeing Lady Ellingham. She could not bear to sit idle, useless, brooding with folded hands in the schoolroom while the child ran wild. Accordingly, after giving as much law as she thought right, she laid her hand on the bell-rope to summon the schoolroom maid, then paused, bethinking herself that she might first smooth her hair. She went for the purpose into the bedroom.

Thence, glancing idly from the window, she saw two figures standing in the half-circle before the house; and it needed but a single look at the boy's drooping head and the toe that restlessly scraped the gravel to

inform her what was the point at issue. Rachel's tender heart owned the appeal; and there might be no delay if the boy was not to be disappointed again. To see was to act, and bareheaded, without staying to snatch up a cloak, or to weigh the punctilios, Rachel ran from the room, raced down the staircase and out by the side door. She turned the corner and saw that she was in time. The Captain and the boy were still together, and intent only on her purpose, she paid no heed to the knot of men who a few paces away were grouped about a tall girl—a new arrival, who stood on the steps before the grand entrance.

Rachel made straight for Captain Dunstan and touched him timidly on the arm. "If you please," she said, breathless with the haste that she had made, "if you please, may he shoot to-day? He was not, indeed, he was not much in fault. If you please, let him shoot."

Whether the Captain was more surprised or displeased was doubtful, but his face gave her no encouragement, and his answer was peremptory. "No!" he said. "Certainly not! He will not shoot to-day! Do you hear, ma'am? And you have nothing on your head and it is cold. You should be in the house."

But Rachel had caught the grateful look that the boy had shot at her, and she persisted. "Oh, but indeed it is not just, Captain Dunstan," she urged. "He was not greatly to blame and it—it is not fair that he should be punished so severely."

"But, I told you, no, ma'am!" the Captain retorted, raising his voice as if he had been on his own quarter-deck and there was a mutiny to be quelled. "And no, it is! The cub has misbehaved and he may think himself lucky that he is not on the old *Medora*, or he'd suffer after another fashion. God bless me, ma'am, I thought you had some sense. It is your business to have it."

"Dear me," a gay voice interposed. "What is this,

Captain Dunstan? What has set you up?" And the girl, whom Rachel had not noticed, joined the little group, followed by her attendant men. "Is it —is it this young lady who has provoked the tempest?"

"Yes," said the Captain curtly. "She ought to know better."

"Never mind, Miss South," Lord Robert struck in. "Do you hang out signals of distress, and I'll be your consort and bear up to the rescue!"

"I fancy the signals are flying already," Colonel Ould said, *sotto voce*, for poor Rachel, finding herself on a sudden the centre of an amused group, had coloured up to her hair.

"Then you may take it I am alongside," Bobbie replied in the same tone. "What can I do for you, Miss South?"

"I want Captain Dunstan to be good enough," Rachel said shyly, "to allow Lord Bodmin to shoot to-day." She was aware that the wind was ruffling the curls that she had not had time to arrange, and most devoutly she wished herself in the house.

"That all?" said Bobbie. "Then it is as good as done. We'll all stand by you, though mind you I am your consort, Miss South, and he can't say us all nay. Come, Miss Froyle," he went on, turning to the girl who had first interposed—she was handsome, tall and full-figured—"he can't refuse you, I am sure. Add your voice," he insisted, a spice of mischief in his tone, "and the thing is done."

"Nonsense, Lord Robert," the girl replied sharply. Then aside, "Who is this?" she asked.

"The governess," some one prompted.

"'Who whipped two female 'prentices to death, And hid them in the coal-hole,'" quoted the Colonel, much to Rachel's confusion.

"No, no," said Bobbie, laughing in spite of himself. "You shall not traduce my consort. Hanged if you

shall. Though I did notice that Ann was looking a little queer at breakfast."

"But why," Miss Froyle asked languidly, "should not Lord Bodmin shoot, Captain Dunstan?"

"He knows very well," the Captain growled. He looked by no means pleased with the turn things had taken. "There, get your guns," he continued impatiently. "And let us be off! To quarters! To quarters!"

"You d—d mutineers!" added the irrepressible Bobbie. "That puts us men out of action. But there still remains Miss Froyle. She is not on the ship's books, though some do say that the beautiful new figure-head of the *Medora* was taken directly from——"

"Lord Robert, you speak too much," the lady said, colouring slightly. "But I hope that you will let Lord Bodmin shoot, Captain Dunstan! See how unhappy the poor boy looks. Please do. I ask it as a favour."

"Brava!" Bobbie cried. "Now he can't refuse."

"Can't he?" the Captain said gruffly. "Sorry, Miss Froyle, but discipline is discipline! The boy has misbehaved and he must pay for it."

"Lo," Ould quoted solemnly, "the poor savage who no charm can find, either in tresses bound or unconfined!" Which drew all eyes to Rachel's head and caused a general laugh.

At this moment a new arrival added himself to the group. It was Filmer, the parson, and he was followed by Lord Ellingham. "Well done, Colonel!" he said. "You surpass yourself. But what is the cause of this rush of wit to the head?"

"Yes, what is up?" Lord Ellingham chimed in gaily. "Good morning, Miss South. Are you part of the joke?"

"Miss South is the whole of it," Ould rejoined—he was enjoying the girl's embarrassment. "She has been praying old George to let young George shoot to-day. And Miss Froyle supports the petition. But

the martinet is proof against all blandishments great and small. That is where we are, Fred."

"Oh, come," my lord answered, "discipline may be carried too far. And after all there is an appeal. Now, Miss South," and he turned to her with the smile which was credited with so many conquests, for he was perfectly aware that he was playing to an appreciative gallery—"you should have come to me, you know. I am known to be weak. But it is not too late if you are really so anxious that the naughty boy shall be forgiven."

"Don't be a fool, Fred," his brother snapped.

"No, no, George. You've played your part. I am the Court of Appeal and you must not threaten me. If you do want the boy pardoned, Miss South—but I must hear your voice, you know."

Rachel knew that he was playing with her and that the others were watching the issue with amusement. She hesitated. She did want the boy to be pardoned, but she felt that to appeal to my lord was to be false to the Captain, who had been kind to her after his fashion. She had gone so far, however, that she could not well retreat, and in a very small voice, "If you please?" she murmured.

My lord's eyes twinkled. "As a favour to you, Miss South, of course?"

Her cheeks tingled but what could she do but assent. "If you please," she murmured.

"Granted!" my lord cried. "Who could resist, eh? But, begad, Miss South, you will have to be grateful, for you've got me into trouble. There! I thought so! There goes George in a huff. I bet his shooting is spoiled for the day?"

As the group broke up, Ould filed off with Miss Froyle. He was a clever man as well as a man of fashion; a wit at White's and a cynical observer of the weak points of others, with a malicious taste for stirring up mischief where the opportunity offered. He knew that

the upshot of the business had not been to his companion's liking, for Charlotte Froyle was credited with something more than a fancy for Captain Dunstan. The Froyles were country neighbours. "George isn't best pleased!" he remarked with a chuckle. "What do you think about it?"

"I don't think anything," she replied. "Except that Ellingham is up to his usual tricks. How Kitty can——"

"Put up with it? Well," he said, smiling, "no doubt there's a limit to everything. And perhaps Fred will find that out by and by—like many a one before him."

"I should think so. I know if I were in her place——" She broke off. "If you are going to shoot to-day," she resumed impatiently, "we ought to be off."

He looked back. "Still at it, Fred!" he called out. "Miss Froyle wants to know if you are going to shoot to-day. Or are you—otherwise engaged, my lad?"

"Coming! Coming!" my lord answered. He said a last laughing word to Rachel whom he had detained, and he came away. The party streamed off to where the keepers and dogs stood awaiting them, while Rachel went back to the schoolroom regretting in her heart that she had left it.

Yet she could hardly say why, for she had gained her point. But she had gained it in such a way that the victory gave her no pleasure. The Captain had been obdurate, but then she suspected that he had been right. And she felt that she had failed him and made but a sorry return for his kindness. Was she to be unfortunate, to be unhappy in all things?

And one thing was certain—she must now see Lady Ellingham. She went to her bedroom and saw to her hair, which called more imperatively than before for the brush. Then, anxious to put an end to all her doubts, she passed through the swing-door and down

the deserted staircase. When she climbed it again the fiat would have gone forth.

But on the first landing she came plump upon Lady Ann lurking there and moving, it seemed, neither up nor down. They had not met since the fracas, and Rachel had already determined on her course. "Good morning, Lady Ann," she said formally, and she passed by her.

But the child thrust out a grudging hand, and seized her skirt. "What are you going to do?" she muttered sullenly, her eyes on the floor.

"I am going to your mother."

"Has George"—the child spoke morosely, her face half hidden by her drooping black mane—"gone to shoot?"

"Yes."

"And you—begged him off?"

"I did." Rachel spoke coldly.

"Then," Ann said, her eyes still on the floor, "I want to—to beg your pardon."

Rachel hesitated. "I am not sure that it is not too late," she said in measured accents. "I am not sure that I wish to listen to you. But," she decided, after an austere pause, "you may come to the schoolroom if you are in earnest."

Rachel was not sure that the child—so sullen and ungracious was her manner—really meant what she said. However, she turned and retraced her steps, and Ann, after, it seemed, a moment's hesitation, followed with lagging feet. But the moment that the door closed on them the child dropped on her knees in the middle of the floor. "I beg your pardon—humbly," she whispered with a dry sob, but without a tear.

"You wish to be forgiven?"

"Yes." The word seemed to be torn from Ann, and Rachel comprehended the effort that the child was making to overcome her stubborn pride. And gladly

would she have kissed her and forgiven her without more words. But she remembered the Captain's "Discipline! Discipline!" and she pressed the matter home.

"That is your side," she said dryly. "What I want you to understand, for you are quite old enough, is how gravely you have insulted me. If you had struck a girl of your own age it would have been wrong. But she would have felt only the smart, and might have retaliated. But when you struck me, at my age, and when your mother had entrusted control to me, it was not the blow that hurt me, it was the insult. Do you understand me? Do you understand that in a moment it unfitted me to be your governess, and that unless you are now truly and honestly sorry——"

"I am," Ann whispered, "truly and humbly sorry."

"And will you try to control your temper in future?"

"I will—try."

"And still I do not know what to do to bring home to you what you did."

"You may box my ears," said Ann, thrusting out her head for the purpose.

"No!" Rachel said, melting—this singular girl had not shed a tear! "I won't do that. I will forgive you, for I believe that you have generous feelings, and I know that it has cost you much, very much to say this. Now sit up and we will try to be better friends."

"And you will tell Uncle George?" Ann said shyly.

"Yes, I will tell him that you are forgiven. And now, my dear, we will get to work, and we shall not find work less pleasant because we know that your brother is enjoying himself."

Ann stooped suddenly and kissed Rachel's hand. For her it was a monstrous demonstration and it brought a little comfort to the girl's heart. Here it seemed was something in which she had not wholly failed.

But that afternoon she felt the schoolroom with its

sad memories to be intolerable, and, restless and miserable, she stole out by the side door and walked far into the forest, telling herself that it would be well to tire herself. If she showed her wisdom in this, however, she did not show it in the choice of the path she followed. Stag's Brook with its tragical associations was closed to her—even by daylight she shrank from it. But there was another walk which she had more than once taken with the tutor and the children, its object an old stone boundary post, called the March Stone. For this she made, deriving a sombre pleasure from the loneliness and the stark wintry woods, but presently and inevitably succumbing to the memories, both bitter and sweet, that the path revived. Here she had paused and talked with him, there he had plucked for her a flower or displayed a new fern, across this rivulet he had placed stepping-stones for her, seated on that rotten trunk, now bare and ugly but then wreathed in green undergrowth, he had pretended to argue with her, to confute, to pique and again to comfort her!

She knew that it was unwise to revive these memories, that they weakened her and rendered her more unhappy. But she could not refrain. She plucked a leaf and a belated flower and pressed them in her pocket-book. She would keep them always—always! Surely, though she must show him a proud face, though she must sacrifice to duty and pride in public, she might at least weep and suffer in the privacy of her own heart. It was all that was left to her!

She came at last to the March Stone, and stood gazing at it with brooding eyes, despondency in every line of her bent head and drooping figure.

CHAPTER XVI

A GOLDEN HAZE

TWO persons had witnessed Rachel's intervention in young Bodmin's behalf, and its issue; they had witnessed it from windows as far apart as their stations in life, but with feelings to some extent akin. Of these two one was Lady Ellingham—but of her later. The other was Girardot.

The tutor was very sore. The rebuff that he had suffered in the drawing-room and the banter in which the Countess had indulged at his expense had wounded his vanity to the quick—and he was a man very vain of his fascination and his conquests. Of his hold over Lady Ellingham's feelings he had never been confident. She had been, and she still was, though he was no believer in woman's virtue, something of an enigma to him. But the part that Rachel had played, Rachel, the little girl over whom at least he had deemed his influence secure, this had not only surprised but enraged him. It had had, too, other and natural consequences. It had heightened his fancy for the girl and at the same time had infused into his feeling for her that tinge of cruelty, which is often a part of a certain kind of love. Still the desire to reduce her had been checked for a while by discretion and held in suspense by the reflection that hasty action might affect his chances in a higher quarter. He was still inclined to wait on events in the hope that he might secure his conquest without that conquest proving too costly.

But what he now saw from the window both quickened his desire and overcame his prudence. He saw her, the little insignificant governess, surrounded by a group of men belonging to the class that if it addressed him at all addressed him with patronage, and he saw her, as he supposed, the centre of their attentions. And while he wondered with angry surprise what this might mean and how she came to be there, the sight added immensely to her value. He suspected, remembering the scene in the drawing-room, that the minx was now flying at higher game, and he feared that the piquancy and the charm that had caught his own fancy might prove as attractive to others. Ay, she was flying at higher game, he was sure; and it was with a view to this that she had eluded and baffled him and joined with my lady in making sport of him! In a twinkling idle liking flamed into passion, and the man burned with the desire to subdue the woman—burned with a desire that mingled love with revenge.

Of success, if he bent himself to conquer, regardless of consequences, he had no doubt. With his handsome face and ingratiating tongue, his cleverness and experience, he was not wont to be defeated. And he was not going to be defeated by this naïve little prude upon whom he was sure that he had at one time made his impression! He had seen her colour rise too often at his entrance, her eyes grow tender at his approach, to doubt that. And though she might now have conceived, dear duplicity that she was, higher ambitions, he knew the force of a first impression, he had proved the power of the first man; and he had little doubt that, at some risk to his position in the house, he could renew the spell. For if men were fire, women were tow, and she should learn that lesson.

So far he had paid his court warily, out of prudence. But now he threw prudence to the winds, and even went so far as to persuade himself that he was more

likely to succeed elsewhere if he summoned jealousy to his aid. It might be that that which had moved my lady to make that surprising and embarrassing attack upon him in the drawing-room had been jealousy. He was not only vain enough to think this possible, but sanguine enough to hope that by pursuing the humbler game he might, in the long run, pull down both.

But for the moment, as he glowered from the window, it was the girl whom he burned to conquer.

He saw that he must attack her where they would not be open to interruption, and his pupil's absence with the shooters left him free. He placed himself on the watch, and soon after two he saw Rachel, in her warm caped cloak, leave the house and walk briskly away, taking a path which entered the forest at the rear of the house. He guessed the place for which she was making, and familiar with the forest, he made for the spot by another path. As he brushed through the dead bracken, and now leapt a narrow rivulet, now plunged through a wet bottom, he had his moments of doubt; not doubt of the maid but doubt of his own wisdom. All about him whispered cold caution; the cheerless breeze, the hollies that bulked darkly against the open leafless trees, the dead aspect of the frozen woods.

But desire knows few obstacles, and he was not one to be easily turned aside. The ardour within him repelled the outer cold, and when he emerged from the wood and saw the March Stone and read the drooping lines of the figure standing before it, he guessed with a thrill of triumph the trend of the girl's thoughts, and that he was the subject of them. The possessive instinct flamed up in him, and confident of victory, he considered only how he might best open the attack.

For he foresaw that at the outset he would have to overcome difficulties—the prejudice which his

prudent holding-off and Lady Ellingham's candour had raised in the girl's mind, no less than the ambitious hopes that she had been led to place elsewhere. He must be both bold and adroit. But given these qualities he was confident that if he did not succeed, all his knowledge of women was at fault.

The girl stood so deep in thought—and it was easy to see, in sad thought—that he was able to approach her unnoticed.

When at last the snap of a stick caught her ear and she turned, her surprise was complete. The tell-tale blood flooded her face, and at that sight, Girardot's heart leapt in triumph. She was his, he was certain of it. Yes, he had set his mark upon her! But it was not his cue at the moment to show what he felt, and it was with a pensive air and leaning on his cane that he stood looking, not at her, but at the crumbling pillar.

"Change!" he said in a low voice. "Change everywhere, yet this is not changed since we saw it last. It is the same, this stone, whether the sun shines, or the clouds gather. Whether a lord gazes on it or a clown. Or you or I. It does not change." He sighed.

His abrupt appearance at a moment when he filled all her thoughts was almost too much for Rachel's self-control. She had been dreaming of him, and taking farewell of him, her heart filled to the brim with his image. And to find him beside her! To be swept in a second by the flood of hopes, possibilities, alarms, that his presence suggested and must suggest! It was only by a most painful effort that the girl retained her composure, and found words. "It does not feel," she murmured, hardly knowing what she said.

"No," he replied in the same tone, but with point. "It does not feel. Nor grieve nor suffer. Our joys or our sorrows, our hopes or their failure, our happiness or misery are one to it. It does not feel."

She felt! Alas, she felt only too strongly. His

tone, sad and faintly reproachful, stirred her to the depths. She could not reason or remember. His silence and his withdrawal were forgotten; and it was much if, taken in this unguarded moment of emotion, surprised when all her defences were down, she could hide her trouble or keep back her tears.

Speech was beyond her, and it was he who continued. "It is cold, heartless, insensible to kindness," he went on, his tone steeped in gloom. "A stone. But at least it does not distrust, it is proof against slander, it does not veer with the weather, it is the same in favour and out of favour, rain or shine. What it was yesterday when the sun warmed it, it is to-day when the clouds gather."

"But it is only a stone," she said, striving for composure; but she strove in vain, for a traitorous sob broke the words.

"Only a stone!" he repeated, his voice rising. "You say that—you! Ah, to me it is more, it is much more! It tells me of hopes, of dear hopes born beside it, of plans formed under its shadow, of visions bound up with it, visions of humble contentment, of a home, a home far from this cold magnificence, and to be shared with one—But for you," after breaking off abruptly, he turned to her, "for you it has no such voice as this? It tells no such tale. It does not speak?"

Alas, it was not only with his words, moving as they were, that poor Rachel had to contend. The spell of his presence, his nearness, his veiled reproach, all conspired to shake and overpower her resistance. The Countess's warning and her own waiting, her long suspense, lost their force, were for nothing, were forgotten. She needed only a sign, some certain sign—nay, only a touch, to be taken.

"Then the past is past?" he continued slowly. "Well, let it be so. We have walked here, we have stood here, we have—or I have—dreamed here. But

to you it is all as if we had not! As if those things had never been! It is done with, Rachel?"

She was quivering from head to foot and in an agony lest her tears should overflow and he should measure the extent of her trouble. Anything was better than this terrible, this betraying silence, and she forced herself to speak. "I do not understand," she whispered.

"You do not?" His voice rose at last in something like scorn. "Oh, yes, you do! You do! Or, forgive me, you did! But a word from another has wiped all from your heart?"

"No!" she cried, tears in her voice. "No! No!"

He passed by the remonstrance as if she had not spoken. "At any rate, you knew once what I meant!" he said. "Deny if you can that you knew that I loved you! Loved you with the love that is as sacred to us, Rachel, and more precious since we possess so little, than it is to those beneath whose shadow, cold as this stone, we are fated to live! You knew that I loved you! I dare you to deny it. There is an affinity between us, a tie that without words would have told you as much—if my lips had never spoken. But you have hardened your heart against me. You have preferred to honest affection the smiles of those who smile only to deceive you."

"Oh, no, no!" Rachel repeated, the tears running openly down her face. "But I thought that you—I thought that you——" And, quite simply, she held out her hands to him.

"What did you think?"

"I thought that you did not mean it," she sobbed. She swayed towards him.

"Then you do!" he cried, and let his exultation appear in his tone. "You do love me!" And, triumphing, he took her, warm and unresisting, in his arms. "You do! Oh, Rachel, is it true—is it true, and am I happy?" To himself, "Oh, lucky stone!" he thought—but Rachel could not see his face or his

smile. And he was careful, he was heedful not to frighten her. With another he would have pushed his opportunity, he would have covered her face with kisses. But he was no novice, there would be time for that by and by; and in this moment of her first surrender he held himself in hand. Instead, as she hid her happy face on his breast, he murmured soft words of endearment in her ears, he pressed her gently to him, soothed her with fond touches.

And Rachel felt and prized his self-restraint, and in this first moment of shy yet blissful surrender found no drawback to her happiness. When at her trembling appeal he at length released her, she saw all things, the leafless forest, the grey sky, the dead herbage, through a tremulous radiant mist, of which he was the centre and creator. He was henceforth to be hers, her man, her pride, her support, the pillar about which her love would wind itself as the summer growth would presently weave itself about the grey pillar beside them. She was wholly happy, if shyly and blushingly happy.

Not was it until—after more than one tender precious interlude, more than one exchange of ardent assurances—they had turned their backs on the spot now so sacred to her, and had left it some way behind them, that she felt the chill air of reality sweep aside a wisp of the roseate haze.

"Will you tell Lady Ellingham?" she murmured, then in a voice as tender as the look she raised to him, "Or—must I?"

She felt the arm that encircled her stiffen, and the movement gave her a hint of discomfort. "Ah!" he said slowly. "That is to be considered. We must go about that warily."

"But you do not mean—that we are not to——"

"To tell her?" he replied confidently. "Of course we must. Of course we must tell her, my darling. But not yet. These things in our class," with a flash

of well-simulated resentment, "are not favoured. I must be prepared with a place before I tell her, for this, you see, may end my engagement. It probably will, indeed."

Contrition seized her. "Oh, my dear," she said, "am I worth it? Are you sure that you——"

"Love you enough?" he answered, drawing her tenderly to him. "Silly one! I hope that you are worth a great deal more than that—or I don't know you! But for a little space, my dear, we must be silent. And I am glad of it, yes, I am glad of it," he repeated, so fervently that she could not but agree. "For love, such love as ours, is a sacred thing, Rachel. I cannot bear that the common wind should blow on it, the common world discuss it! If I could, indeed, if it were possible, I would keep it from all! It should be for ever our secret, our treasure, our possession. I would guard it from every eye, every vulgar ear and tongue!"

"But that cannot be," she objected timidly, yet loved him the more for his delicacy.

"No," with a sigh. "That cannot be—of course. But for a little space let us keep it untarnished. In ten days or a fortnight, when I have tried the ground——"

"You will tell her?"

"Of course." He spoke as if there could be no question of that. "We must. To be sure, we must. There is no other course open to us."

She owned the beauty of his thought; of his conception of a love, wholly and sacredly their own, and guarded from the knowledge of the cold, indifferent world. But her nature, simple and open, might not have consented so easily but for the limit of time that he named. Ten days? It would pass so quickly, so happily, and who, at such a moment, could raise scruples or put forward difficulties, as if he were one to be distrusted?

But a ruder blast was presently to penetrate, though it was far from dispersing, the glamour in which Rachel moved. They were within a short distance of the house when from a converging path some hundred yards before them, there issued the shooting party, straggling by twos and threes towards the Folly. Had one of the men looked back as they passed the fork, he must have seen the couple, and quick to perceive this, Girardot drew her out of the path. He could not hide his discomposure.

"This won't do," he said hurriedly. "Or all is out, dearest. We must not be seen together, and in any case we must have parted presently. Do you go on. Go, dear!" Gently he stooped and kissed her. Then, as he released her, "Do you go on, and God bless you, my own!"

She disliked the concealment, but what could she do with his kiss still on her lips? She complied and walked on in a tremor of happiness, hardly able, now that she was alone, to believe that this thing, this blessed thing had happened to her—that he was hers, her own, her very own. But she was not long left to her thoughts. She was indeed roughly plucked from them, for at the meeting of the ways she came plump upon Ann—Ann capering along with her hand in her father's.

Had Rachel been walking in the real world instead of in that rosy dream, she might have heard their voices earlier, and have hung back and avoided them. But as it was, she was taken by surprise, and the conscious blush that crimsoned her face caught my lord's eye.

"Gad, the girl's a beauty," he thought, "of a sort." Aloud, "Hallo, Miss South!" he cried. "Were you hunting for the truant? If she plagues you," he continued ruffling Ann's black mane with his hand, "half as much as she plagues me, I am sorry for you! How do you manage her? Hope you whip her well!"

"No, she don't!" said Ann stolidly.

"Well, how the deuce does she manage you, Miss Brimstone?"

"I like her," Ann said dispassionately.

"The devil you do! How's that, Miss South? Why, I thought this rogue made war on all governesses, tutors, principalities and powers! Can she be good?"

"She can be," Rachel said demurely. The by-play had given time for her hot cheeks to cool, and she spoke calmly, though her eyes were unusually bright.

"Can she? Then let's test you, Ann. Run on and tell Felix to make me a hot bath. Show us how fast those thin legs of yours can run."

Ann, glad to be in motion, flew after the rest of the party, the rearmost of whom were still in sight. My lord turned to his companion. "Gad," he said, with his gay captivating laugh, "we go down before your charms like ninepins! I this morning, Ann this afternoon! Come now," with a sly peep under her bonnet, "who is to be your next conquest?"

He meant nothing, but he could no more refrain from making love when he spoke to a pretty woman than he could help breathing; though in nine cases out of ten it was mere sport. And in this case it was certainly innocent, for with all his faults he would have drawn the line at his daughter's governess almost as sharply as Captain George himself. But when a piquant little thing with shining eyes and lips that trembled into smiles met him at the junction of two paths, to waste the opportunity would have been as impossible for Frederick, Lord Ellingham, as to refrain from oysters in September.

He might have paid a much broader compliment without affecting Rachel in her present mood. "I fear that Lady Ann is but a temporary capture," she said sedately.

"Well, she's a deuced difficult one! More difficult

I warrant than most of us, eh ? Confess, now. Isn't she ? " Then in a lower tone, " I say, are you coming down this evening ? "

" To the drawing-room, Lord Ellingham ? "

" To be sure."

" No," Rachel explained. " I come down only when Lady Ellingham is alone."

" Oh, come now, that is too bad," he protested good-naturedly. " And tell me—between you and me, ain't you confoundedly dull up there, wasting your—you know the rest ? "

" No," Rachel replied, with such a look of conscious happiness that my lord, having no clue to it, felt his interest in her increase. " I am happier in the schoolroom than in the drawing-room."

" The devil you are ! Well, begad, that's one for us ! "

" Oh ! " Rachel cried. " I didn't mean that ! "

" But it is true ! Begad, it is ! I can see it is. But why now ? " in his most insinuating tone. " Ain't we nice to you ? "

" Oh, yes," Rachel protested, colouring. " Of course. But the schoolroom is my proper place. And so I am happier there."

" In your proper place ? I see. You are happier when you are there. By Jove," he exclaimed with feeling, " I wish we all were. But, lord, what a wise little lady you are ! If you teach that to Ann she'll be a wiser man," with a momentary gravity in his tone, " than her father. Suppose I come up and take a lesson too, do you think you can teach me that ? What do you say, Miss South ? "

" That you would not be in your proper place," Rachel replied demurely, but with a smile hovering on her lips. " And that would not be good for you or for Ann." Then, " Good day, Lord Ellingham, I turn off here." And with a gay little nod—for her heart was like a singing bird, rising higher and higher

on the swell of the incredible happiness that flooded her—she turned away to the side door, and went up to the schoolroom.

There the fire burned low, glowing like a sulky eye in the twilight, and the room was cold. But what matter? What matter if all was dull and shabby within, and without were winter and east winds and nipping airs? For she brought her own clime with her, and to that room which she had left wretched and despondent she returned in all the glow of an amazing, an overpowering happiness. In the gloom she saw only halcyon days; days of tender reverie and thankful contemplation, days given up to reverencing and cherishing and turning every way the glorious heaven-born gift of his love! The gift that had transfigured and was transfiguring the world for her, that was brightening the long vista of life with fairest flowers and filling the sunlit spaces with nature's melody! What outer cold was there, what nipping air, that could reach this inner warmth? What loneliness was there that was not welcome—ay, thrice welcome if it left her free to bask in the sunshine of her dreams?

Meanwhile my lord strode into the house, half puzzled and half amused. "What a provoking, prudent little baggage it is!" he thought. "And eyes like stars! I'm hanged if I don't think that she was laughing at me half the time! Or preaching! In my proper place, eh? Well, she had me there!" And the smile vanished and his face was moody as he entered the hall.

CHAPTER XVII

THE ROASTING OF GEORGE

THE girl had given hardly a thought to the encounter with my lord and less to his gallantry. But more than one of the shooters had looked back, and recognizing her had found something to say about it. Then Ann in her rapid flight had been waylaid by her uncle. She had explained her errand and he too had looked back and frowned. The way in which he had been overruled that morning had not pleased him, and he was jealous, as he was ever jealous on my lady's account. And possibly there were other grounds for his vexation which he did not understand and certainly did not own. At any rate, when my lord strode into the hall the Captain met him with a sombre face. "For God's sake, Fred," he blurted out, "let that little girl alone. There is trouble enough without that!"

Now these two, between whom there was an affection rare in their class, had long ago changed places. Success had made the younger independent, for in his day fortunes were rapidly made at sea; and hard service and the habit of command had won for him the elder's respect. He had become the mentor, and as a rule was heard with patience if with small result. But no man more warmly resents a false accusation than he who is guilty on other counts; and my lord was no exception to the rule. He fired up. "Without what?" he replied sharply. "Confound you, what do you mean, George? Mayn't I speak to my

own governess ? Damme, man, what are we coming to ? "

" She's not your governess," George replied. " She's Ann's. And all I say is, just leave her alone. You know what I mean very well."

" Begad, I'll tell you what it is ! " my lord retorted. " I believe you are taken with her yourself, Master George ! " And the idea in a moment restored his good temper. " I suspect I've crossed your hawse," he added, grinning, " as you'd say, and so it's ' Hands off ! ' That's it, old chap ! "

" Oh, stow that," the Captain rejoined. " You only say it for the sake of saying something."

" It's a hit, anyway ! " my lord replied with glee. " Hang me if it isn't. Now, mind you respect her virtue, George ! Remember she's under my charge. I'm responsible and—ha ! ha ! Hit between wind and water ! Off, are you ? " He laughed aloud as the Captain, with an angry oath, turned away and strode up the stairs. " Poor George," he reflected mischievously. " I beat him there, I guess ! "

And after dinner, when the matter came up again, and my lord found himself the object of attack, he smiled at the others' innuendoes, and craftily waited his time. " So that was why you lagged behind ? " Bobbie said. " Ann, indeed, you old sinner ! "

" A silly rogue that plagues me," quoted the Colonel. " A little French—governess ! And having some character to lose she met me in the wood ! "

" And only two nights ago Fred pretended that he had never seen her ! "

" True, 'pon honour," my lord laughed.

" Poor girl ! " quoted the Colonel gravely—he was an amateur actor of some note. " I really am in the utmost concern for her."

" For us, for us, you mean," returned Lord Robert. " Inhospitable dog ! Fred asks us here and leaves us only the chambermaids."

"Out of regard for your innocence," my lord laughed. "You are too young, Bobbie."

"And after all," said Sir Austin Froyle, with the air of one deciding a question on the Bench, "a man has a right to the game in his own warren."

My lord laughed. "Oh, it's a free warren for me. You can all go in and win—if you can. You, George, if you like," pointedly. "She's a dear little innocent for me."

"Ay, innocent as Bobbie," the Colonel contributed. "I warrant she knows how to turn the key in a door."

"They are all dear little innocents," lisped Bobbie. "Only just a little less innocent when they have walked home with Fred."

But the Captain, though he suspected that Fred was laying a trap for him, could stand it no longer. "Oh, let the child alone!" he said with irritation. "You are all talking d—d nonsense! A set of stap-my-vitals Lord Foppingtons, every mother's son of you."

"Hallo, George!" Lord Robert stared, genuinely surprised by the attack. "What the devil's bitten you?"

"As for Fred," the Captain continued, "he's a pig to carry on as he does. He knows the girl is a good girl."

"They are all good girls," smiled the Colonel. "Didn't I say so?"

"Yes, but you didn't mean it, Ould. I'll wager that Fred never laid a finger on her and never got more than a civil word from her!"

"True as my glove, George," my lord assented, delighted at his success in "drawing the badger."

But the Colonel had now caught the idea, and pursued it. "Joseph—I mean George—is indeed what a man should be," he said solemnly. "A pattern to his brother, Fred. He professes the noblest sentiments, 'tis edification to hear him. But he makes me suspect if he be indeed the man of principle he seems

to be. Fred Surface ? Nay, my dear Lady Sneer-well, but his brother George is the man. Now after what we have heard I'm open to wager that George knows a deal more about the little French governess than Fred does—and damn his sentiments ! "

My lord clapped his hands. " Well, George, what do you say ? " he cried. " Begad," to Ould, " I think you have tailed him." For the Captain certainly looked a little out of countenance. " I'm hanged if he hasn't stolen a march upon us, the sly dog ! "

George answered him sulkily. " All I say is, let the girl alone," he said. " Let her be. If you do her no more harm than I have she'll be lucky. But," viciously, " you are just a crew of waisters, good for nothing but tumbling over one another in pursuit of mischief ! As if there weren't enough women where you come from, and good enough for you ! "

Colonel Ould laughed softly. " Odd ! " he said. " It's confounded odd what a change has come over George's service since Lady Hamilton joined it. They used to be rough sea-dogs, smelling of the tar-bucket and, saving your presence, George, with uncouth manners and coats to match—you might know one at sight as far as from Schomberg House to the Carlton Corner—and as much given to flirtation as a bear in a pit ! But since Lord Nelson set the fashion of gallantry——"

" Oh ! " the Captain cried impatiently. " For God's sake, leave Lord Nelson out ! "

" There ! " The Colonel winked. " He proves my point. You mustn't touch Lord Nelson. Why ? "

" I could soon tell you why ! " growled the badger.

" No need ! No need ! " airily. The Colonel was not over-fond of Fred's brother and had no mind to lose the opportunity of roasting him. " It's writ large all over the service. He's done the trick for them ! He's made them all men of fashion, lifted 'em to the plane of elegance, made 'em all lady-killers !

They all aspire to a Lady Hamilton now, buy their coats at Stultz's, go soaked in *mille-fleurs*, handle a snuff-box instead of a tar-bucket, and chase the ladies! So here's to Lord Nelson!"

"It's 'here to Lord Nelson' for a very different reason," snapped the Captain, amid the general laughter.

"He's an admiral like another," said old Froyle.

But this was too much for George. "Oh, is he begad?" he retorted. "Like another! I know that is what you fools of landsmen think, fribbling over your dish of catlap! But I wager you he's not like another! He's——"

"He's made you all gentlemen," sneered Ould, "present company of course excepted," with an ironical bow.

"He's made us all fighters!" the Captain continued, too much in earnest to notice the gibe. "He has taught us all to go in to win instead of counting heads and thinking only of coming out with just the best of it! He's taught us to sink, burn, and destroy, yard-arm to yard-arm, instead of standing off and playing at long bowls! Fashion be d—d! He's gone back to old Hawke and made Quiberon the fashion, that's what he has done! There will be no more First of Junes and no more Hothams, thank God! Fashion? Didn't the Nile set a fashion and set such a fashion as was never known before! Was ever such a victory dreamed of—twelve ships taken out of fourteen—till he won it?"

"Bravo, George!" laughed my lord. "You've mouthed it finely. I did not know that you had it in you, begad!"

"At the battle of the Nile, I was there all the while.
I was there all the while at the battle of the Nile,"

hummed the Colonel, slyly. He had not failed to note the Captain's little weakness.

"But Duncan?" argued Lord Robert. He was still young and capable of catching the spark. "Surely Duncan——"

"Oh, Duncan? A sound man," the Captain grunted, a little ashamed of his outburst. "But Nelson taught him the trick at St. Vincent."

"And you may take it from me," said the Colonel, sticking to his point, because he saw that it annoyed the Captain, "he taught them the other lesson too—to be heroes of the clouded cane as well as of the spontoon and to bear down on the donnas as stoutly as on the dons! Fred, my boy, you must look to your laurels, and to your governess, or he'll cut you out under your nose! What are you going to do about it?"

"Go to the ladies!" my lord replied, laughing. "Come, break up, break up! Or we shall be in disgrace again this evening! Someone shake the parson there!"

Lord Robert clapped the Captain on the shoulder as they rose.

"Come, Admiral," he said. "Let's see you board the little craft! And if you don't make a leg conformably, hang me if I don't enter for the filly-stakes myself and cut you out!"

The Captain's strength did not lie in repartee. "Confounded ass you are, Bobbie!" he said.

"And off the course too, Bobbie," said my lord. "The young lady won't be there."

"Oh, you know, do you, you sly dog! You are in her confidence. Then, gad, let's have her down."

"Yes," said Sir Austin, whose powdered head simulated a wisdom that he did not possess. "Why not? It seems a promising proposal."

"Then suppose you put it to her ladyship," my lord said dryly, "and see what she says."

"Oh!" Sir Austin answered, a little checked. "Well, if you put it that way, I don't know that I quite——"

"Nor I," said my lord, more dryly still.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE DISCLOSURE

IT has been hinted that the tutor was not the only person who had overlooked from a window the scene of that morning. Lady Ellingham had witnessed it and wondered and frowned. What did it mean, she asked herself, and what was the girl doing out there, bareheaded, thrusting herself among the shooters when her place was in the schoolroom? It was unbecoming at the best, and my lady meditated a word in season that, without too much mortifying the young lady, would set her in her place.

But when my lord joined the group and the debate, whatever its purport, seemed to be left to those two, my lady's face set in harder lines. She saw, and she thought that she understood. Too well she knew, alas, only too well she remembered his power of fascination, his attitude when he was set on conquest, the turn of his head, the tones of his voice, its appeal, its underlying fun! And only too well she knew the charm that he could throw over a simple girl, for had she not herself succumbed to it—to be happy for a time and miserable, silently and proudly miserable, for three years past! And he was the same still, she thought bitterly; ever the same, seeking ever a new distraction, unable to resist a new face, and falling himself a willing victim to the first woman who wooed him!

"But not in my house!" she thought with passion, and unconsciously she pressed her nails into the palms of her hands. "That I will not suffer! If she

is to be the next, she shall go ! She shall go whatever the cost ! He may follow her if he pleases, but it shall not be under my roof ! "

And in a moment she was hot with a jealousy the strength of which she did not herself suspect. She watched and she lost nothing of that which passed. She noted the Captain's indignant departure, the shrug with which Charlotte Froyle turned away, the Colonel's summons that dragged my lord at last and reluctantly from the governess's side. " Always the same ! " she whispered, pacing her room, when they were gone. " Always the same ! As light to love as to leave ! Why—why was I born to love him still ? "

But when that afternoon she was so unfortunate as to witness the return of the two—in company again, and smiling and talking, and apparently on the most easy terms—what could she think ? What but the worst ? The dog with a bad name is hanged on slight evidence, and here, to a jealous eye, was proof and to spare. The fever in my lady's breast flamed up, but moved as she was, she was not one to act in haste. She had so long practised self-restraint, she had so firmly settled it with herself that her only armour against contempt lay in silence that she still hesitated. Though she suffered she hid her feelings and kept on her mask ; and, slyly attacked by Charlotte Froyle, as they sat over their work, she foiled her friend with the old weapons.

" The governess ? " she repeated, and languidly held up her plain-stitch to the light. " Who recommended her, did you ask, Charlotte ? "

But she a little overdid her negligence, and " I suppose," Charlotte replied, " you did not engage her without a recommendation ! "

" Without a recommendation ? Oh dear no. Of course not. Old Lady Elisabeth engaged her for me."

" Ah ! Did she ? " Charlotte in her turn bent

over her tambour-frame. "Don't you think, my dear, that the young woman is a little forward?"

"I haven't noticed it. I hope not. Ann gets on with her better than I expected. And Ann," with a sigh, "is difficult, you know. What made you think that, my dear?"

"Oh, I don't know. But the men"—Miss Charlotte was too wary to press directly on the sore point—"seemed to be making a good deal of her this morning. I confess, I thought her something of a minx, Kitty."

"I should be sorry to think that," my lady answered judicially. "She's young, of course."

Now Charlotte, though a very handsome girl, was not quite so young as she had been, and her voice had a rasp in it when she replied. "Yes. But don't you think it is unwise to make much of young persons in that class? Their heads are so easily turned!"

My lady agreed, and added, "One has to be careful for their sake."

Charlotte bent over her frame and shot her last bolt. "I saw her coming in this afternoon," she said.

But Lady Ellingham was on guard. "Was she out? I hope that she came in in good time," she replied. And then her ladyship's maid came in and said that it was time to dress, and the subject dropped.

But insensible to the pricks of Miss Charlotte's darts as the Countess seemed, they stung and rankled, though, schooled by her haughty spirit and long use, she betrayed nothing. At all times she moved among her company, among them but not of them, and with something of the stately dignity of a Handel minuet; at all times she lived a little aloof, accepting their homage—and with the exception of Ould they were shy of her—with a coldness that she did not deign to mask. And they, deeming her ice, a woman without passion, shrank from a siege to which in the case of

another woman in her position they might have been tempted.

But under the lace that veiled her white bosom the fire burned. To suspicions once kindled—and God knows she had had in the past only too much reason to suspect—all is fuel; and she watched and waited, even Ould, who believed in no woman's virtue and observed her curiously, having no clue to her thoughts. And one evening, a week later, having shepherded Charlotte from the table a little earlier than usual, she fancied that her hour was come. She heard as she sat, seemingly absorbed in the third volume of her novel, a light step cross the hall. The servants had retired to their supper—it could not be one of them; on the other hand she had not heard the door of the dining-room open, and for a moment, for some moments, she repelled the suspicion. But it returned and tormented her. The tread had been light, it had seemed to her to be stealthy; and after resisting the temptation for some minutes during which she heard no returning step, she yawned and threw down her book.

"Oh dear!" she said. "Was that Ann?" She rose to her feet.

Charlotte did not look up. "I heard nothing," she said.

"I think I'll see. She's a dreadful monkey, and if she runs about barefoot she'll get this abominable influenza. I think I will see."

She moved slowly down the room, and seemed to be undecided whether to go or stay. At last she appeared to make up her mind, she opened the door and went out. But in the hall, with no eyes upon her, she became a different woman. She stood, listening, her every sense on the alert, her face hard. A moment and a faint stir far above—on the second floor she judged—reached her ear. Still she hesitated, her jealousy and her pride at odds. Unfaithful he

was—she knew it and all the world knew it, and every day she had to confront that knowledge with an impassive face. But under her roof, with one of her household, stealing out while his guests covered his absence and smiled at his dupe? That were too much to bear! To submit to that was impossible; and the struggle ended in pride making common cause with jealousy and anger reinforcing both. She crossed the hall and with a light step she went up the wide shallow stairs. She loathed that which she was doing, and still more that which she was going to do. But what choice had she if she was not to connive at this horror? If she would put an end to it, if she would show him that there was a limit to the things that she would suffer, this was her chance.

The staircase lay partly in shadow, but on each landing there was a lamp. Her slippered feet, as she ascended, made no sound, and the faint stir which she had heard above had ceased. But something had replaced it that was infinitely more disturbing, more convincing—the murmur of whispering voices, and once a low, half-stifled laugh. Ah, but that stung her, that smarted, and if she had hesitated before, if with each stair she had mounted more slowly, she hesitated no longer. The servants were shut away in their own quarters, and save for an occasional outburst of laughter from the dining-room the house was as still as the grave—until she was half-way up the higher flight, between the first and second floors. Then, when no more than half a dozen stairs still hid the truth from her, she stumbled over her skirt, and though she recovered herself she made sufficient noise to give the alarm. And the alarm was taken, and taken on the instant. She heard a scuffle, a hurried tread crossed the landing, a door squeaked. Quickly as she sprang up the last stairs she was only in time to see the baize door swing to.

He was gone! But the girl was there. She had

risen from the settee that stood on the landing, and stood, apparently, arrested in the act of flight, her panic-stricken face turned towards the staircase and the intruder. A lamp stood on a bracket not far off, and if ever light fell on conscious guilt the Countess was convinced that it fell on it now, as it lit up Rachel's startled face.

For a moment Lady Ellingham surveyed her victim with scathing eyes. Then, "You wicked, abominable girl!" she said, in a voice low, but quivering with abhorrence. "In my own house! You!" And moving to the lamp she raised it and pitilessly threw its light upon the shrinking girl. "You dare! You! In my house!"

There are situations in which innocence, or what a moment ago and before the light fell on it, passed for innocence, suffers all the pains of guilt; and Rachel, startled both by the desertion of her lover and the shock of detection, endured almost as much as if she had been the guilty thing that the Countess deemed her. Her conscience was not clear; and surprised in this clandestine meeting and dazzled by the light, she fancied for a moment that she deserved Lady Ellingham's words. She winced under the elder woman's scorn and did for an instant look the thing she passed for.

"You abandoned creature!" the Countess said, and her words cut not the less deeply because she kept her voice low.

But this Rachel found too much. Her senses were returning, and she knew that she had not deserved this. She revolted. "Oh, but I am not that!" she quavered. "How—how dare you say it?"

"How dare you be it?" the other retorted with burning eyes.

The Countess's passion indeed was such that it almost overpowered Rachel anew. The girl clasped her hands in appeal. "Oh, but indeed, indeed I am

not," she protested. "You have no right to say it! No right! I did but——"

"You met him here! Do not lie, wretched girl! You have been with him! You met him here—alone and secretly. He left you but this moment. I heard him go!"

"Yes, but—but you must hear me!" Rachel insisted, distraught. "You must hear me! It is true we met—here. There was nowhere else that we could meet. It was wrong perhaps, but don't," in distress, "don't look at me like that, Lady Ellingham. I have done nothing to deserve such looks. And if I could tell you all, if I could explain——"

But in face of that which seemed to her so shameless an avowal, the Countess could not contain herself; and unfortunately Rachel in the agony of her pleading laid a hand on her sleeve as if to compel her to listen. "Tell me? Explain?" my lady cried, and with a gesture of loathing she plucked her dress from the pollution of the other's touch. "You—you would dare to tell me why you met him—here, alone, by stealth? Why, girl, have you no shame left at your age? No modesty? That you dare to say to my face that you—oh!" she broke off with an exclamation of impotent contempt, "that men should be fools enough to be caught by the white face of such a little wanton as you!"

Rachel flinched as if she had been struck. The word pricked her to the quick, but it also spurred her to action, it stung her to defend herself at all costs. She must protect herself—he could not wish her, branded with that name, to be silent! And quivering with indignation, "You insult me, Lady Ellingham, grossly, wickedly!" she cried, in a tone that the other had not yet heard. "And I claim a hearing. I will be heard. I have done nothing, nothing to deserve such a word! No, ma'am, nothing! It is true, quite true, that I met Mr. Girardot here and——"

"Mr. Girardot?"

"Clandestinely, I admit it, and I was wrong! But we had no other place to meet—I would not receive him in the schoolroom—and we are betrothed. He did not wish it to be known yet, but after what you have said I am sure that he would wish me to—to speak. He has asked me to be his wife."

Lady Ellingham stared. "Impossible!" she exclaimed. But she set the lamp back in the place from which she had taken it, and her tone, her face, her manner, all were altered. "Impossible! Mr. Girardot?" She looked hungrily at the girl. She devoured her face with her eyes.

"No," Rachel said firmly. "It is not impossible. It is so."

"And he was with you—here? Now? Mr. Girardot?"

"You heard him go," Rachel answered. But she winced, for how could she explain even to herself his desertion of her? And the flight that had left her to face the trouble?

"You tell me solemnly," the Countess persisted, "that it was Mr. Girardot that I heard go from you?"

"Lady Ellingham," Rachel protested, trembling with indignation, "why do you doubt me? Why should I lie? I have told you the truth."

The Countess covered her eyes with her hand. She tried to think. She had not betrayed herself? No, she had been stopped in time. And that was something! Thank God for that. But what was it that she had said to the girl? How far had she gone? So far that she must go farther. She could only set herself right by telling the girl the truth, and indeed she must tell her—she owed it to her to tell her. "Mr. Girardot is to marry you?" she said, looking again at Rachel, and this time with pity in her eyes. "Did I hear that aright?"

"You did," Rachel said with dignity. "Though

I fear that I shall have displeased him by avowing it. It was his wish that our engagement should be private—for a time."

"Why?"

"For certain reasons, Lady Ellingham."

"What were they, if you please?"

"He thought that you might not like it," Rachel confessed, losing a little of her dignity.

"For no other reason that he gave you?"

"No."

"Then I can tell you one," Lady Ellingham said firmly, "that he did not tell you. And one more to the point. If you are sure," with a penetrating look at the girl's face, "that you do not know it? Are you sure that you do not know it?"

"I do not." Rachel tried to speak with confidence, but there was a shade of hesitation, even of pity, in the Countess's manner, and her heart misgave her. "Unless, indeed," she allowed in a lower voice, "he wished it to be our secret—between us."

"I fear he did wish that," Lady Ellingham said, "but it was not his true motive. Miss South, he is deceiving you," she continued very gravely. "I too undertook to keep a secret for him, but I hold myself released by his conduct. Mr. Girardot may have promised to marry you, but he cannot do so."

Rachel recoiled and the colour left her face. "Why?" she exclaimed.

"Because he is married already. He is a married man and his wife is alive."

"Oh, no, no! No! No!" Rachel cried, raising her voice and repeating the denial as if her disbelief would keep the thing at bay. "No! No!" she cried again. But she was white to the lips. "Do not say it! You are deceiving me!"

The Countess regarded her sombrely. "No, I am not deceiving you," she said. "He is not a good man, and it is he who has deceived you."

"Married?" She stared with terrified eyes at the elder woman.

"I know that he is married. I have it from his own mouth. He was married before he came to us. And his wife is still alive."

The Countess fully expected that the girl would swoon or would burst into passionate sobbing. But Rachel did neither. She sank upon the seat which she had so lately shared with him and stooping forward with her face hidden in her hands, she swayed herself to and fro. Once, twice a violent shudder convulsed her body and betrayed the storm that raged within.

The Countess looked at her with compassion and for a moment she hesitated. Then, "He is not a good man," she went on, in a low voice, "if indeed there be any good men. And you, girl, be thankful, oh, be thankful, that you have learned the truth in time, and not, as others, have learned it too late! Be thankful that by God's mercy I heard his step and followed him and found you. You have not loved him. You have loved like many another, the creation of your own fancy. From the reality, could you have seen him in his true colours, you would have turned with horror. You have—you have but made the mistake that all women make. But you are warned in time, you are spared the fate he had prepared for you—and how many are not spared! Oh, girl, whip up your pride! Think, think not of that to which you looked forward, but of that which he meant for you! Of that which you have escaped! And for the future trust no man, remember, remember always," she repeated with growing feeling, "that there is no man who will not deceive you, who does not think you his prey, who when he has got from you what he wants will not trick you, scorn you, flout you with cold courtesy, dishonour you with a smiling face—ay, even though you bear his name, though the world call you wife and outwardly he keep faith with you! Trust him not, trust him not,"

the Countess continued wildly—and had Rachel looked up she would have seen that the proud handsome face was distorted by passion, "he will make you his plaything for a year and his scorn for life! Wife or mistress, lorette or lady, there is but one fate for us! To be used while it is their pleasure and cast off when it is their will!"

Rachel rose, swaying on her feet. She kept her white stricken face turned away. "May I go?" she whispered with a convulsive shiver. She could bear no more.

My lady's thoughts had left her, but they returned. She looked at her pitifully. "Yes, poor child, go," she said. "Yet, think—think for your comfort how it would have been with you had you learned the truth too late! And, thank God, girl, thank Him on your knees that you have been spared."

Rachel tried to say something, but her parched throat refused to let the words pass. She had only one wish, one thought—to be alone, to hide herself with her misery. Blindly she groped her way to the swing-door, fumbled for the handle, and found it. With a dull sound the door closed behind her.

"He will guess that I have told her," the Countess thought. "For her, God help her, poor girl!" She looked after her with deeper feeling than any of her friends would have placed to her credit. She stood for a time, staring at the lamp and passing her handkerchief over her lips. Then she went slowly back to the drawing-room.

Charlotte looked up from her work. "What a long time you have been," she said.

"Yes, I was detained."

"There was nothing the matter, I hope?"

"No," my lady said negligently, "as it turned out, nothing. But it was well that I went up. Have you finished the spray of roses?"

CHAPTER XIX

A GLASS OF WINE

A KEEN, bright morning had followed a night of frost, a hard frost coming late in the winter. The sky, pale-blue and veiled in mist towards the horizon, was without a cloud. The sun, melting the hoar that had gathered on the grass, was reflected from a million pin-points bright as diamonds. The sound of a squirrel munching beech-mast, or of feet pressing through the dried bracken, could be heard forty paces away. The smoke from the many chimneys of Queen's Folly rose straight upward, and about the entrance the robin, man's friend, and the sparrow, his parasite, awaited his operations in hopeful expectancy.

Colonel Ould, with all his faults, was a sportsman; and the prospect of a bright day in the open drew him early from the house. But early as he was, the Captain was before him, and Ould could not withstand the temptation to plague him; a dislike, natural between two men so different, was augmented by the rivalry that in that day existed between the services. "Hallo, George," he said, "looking for the early—governess, eh? No, she's not out yet. I haven't caught so much as the gleam of her petticoat for a week past."

"Well, I haven't either," the Captain replied snappishly. "She is not well, I am told."

"So I hear too. All the better for Ann! And I'll bet that quaint little devil will make the most of it. I suspect she's pining for you, George."

"Who? Ann?"

"No, the little filly."

"You be hanged," the Captain retorted. "I see no more of her than you do."

"But I don't look for her. And you seem to know more about her than most of us. Talk of the devil, here's her next-door neighbour! Good morning, Mr. Girardot." He greeted the tutor with a cool nod. "You are early. Going into the forest?"

"For a short time," the tutor replied rather curtly. "I am on an errand." He passed out through the great gates.

Ould looked after him. "Got the black dog on his back," he said thoughtfully. "No doubt about that. Now I wonder what's the matter with him. Looks as if he had been ill! As if he had not slept for a sennight, by gad! I'll tell you what, my friend. I'm d——d if I would keep that good-looking Jemmy Jessamy in my house a day if I were Fred. I'm hanged if I would."

"Why?"

"It's not why, but if. If I had a handsome wife, my Trojan. That's why."

The Captain, who was snapping the lock of his gun and trying the flint, looked up. "What the devil do you mean?" he said. "You know you are too fond of that kind of thing, Ould. If I thought you meant anything by it——"

"Well? What?"

"I should ask you for an explanation."

"And if I meant anything," the other answered carelessly, "you should have one."

They were verging on dangerous ground and both knew it; and the Captain's temper was rising. Fortunately my lord appeared at this moment and joined them. "Hallo, hallo!" he said cheerily. "Bickering again, you two? What about? What about? What about? as the old boy at Windsor would say."

"What men always bicker about," the Colonel replied. "Woman, lovely woman. Your establishment,

if you must know, Fred. What of the little governess ? George here has been out and on the look-out this half-hour and not caught so much as the whisk of her petticoat. Says she's ill—pining for him, I say."

My lord grinned. "I expect George made the chase too hot for her. But have you heard about Bobbie ? Bobbie got Ann to take him up to the schoolroom—nothing he liked so much as a schoolroom tea. Only just out of it himself, d'you see, so it's natural. Well, Bobbie was done to a turn ! The little girl wasn't showing—wasn't well, she said, and Bobbie had to stuff thick bread-and-butter with Ann that the imp might not see through him ! And what's worse, my lady heard of it and smelled a rat, and turned the cold shoulder to the Beau at dinner ! I saw there was something afoot and I wondered what he had done ! " My lord laughed at the recollection.

"Bobbie's growing up," said Ould.

"Young puppy ! " growled the Captain, and moved away towards the keepers.

The Colonel's eyes followed him, though his next words appeared to bear no relation to him. "I just saw that bear-leader of Bodmin's go out," he said. "There are the makings of a Don Juan about that young man, Fred, unless I am mistaken."

"Yes, good-looking chap. Plays the devil in the village, I'll wager. But the boy likes him." My lord for his part liked everybody, had a good word for everyone, called the men by their names and chucked the maids under the chin—was hail-fellow-well-met with everybody—with one exception.

The two moved away to join the rest of the party. But Ould, who loved mischief and had a rare nose for a secret, was thoughtful. He had remarked the tutor's drawn face and feverish eyes and was sure that they meant something. Of the man's relation to Rachel he had no inkling ; of his surprising good looks there could be no question. And trained by habit to think

the worst, and believing in no woman's virtue, the Colonel began to suspect that he had hit on the secret of my lady's coldness.

He was so much taken with the idea—his favourite maxim was, "The proper study of mankind is woman" —that early in the afternoon he fell out of the line on the ground that his Manton was out of order. Turning homeward, he strolled thoughtfully back to the house. He alone of the party had laid some siege to the Countess, and his wits were sharpened, and his malice excited, by the complete failure of his efforts. But knowledge is power, and he reflected that there were more ways than one of arriving at an end.

He entered by the side-door and, ridding himself of his gun, he placed himself on the watch at a window. He was well aware that the odds, even if he were right, were against his learning anything; but the tutor's face had impressed him, he argued from it that a crisis of some kind was at hand, and the interval during which the men were abroad—and Charlotte Froyle had joined them—was one that favoured happenings. It was such an unguarded time as the cautious might use—and once on the track his patience was as great as his flair for mischief was acute.

By and by, when he had been on the watch no more than five minutes, he was rewarded—against all the probabilities. He saw the tutor leave the house and make for the forest, and three minutes later he saw the Countess follow with every sign of haste. She went in the same direction.

"By G—d!" the watcher muttered, slapping his thigh. "I believe I'm right! There's for our spotless lady! But they are all alike! All of a feather! Well, if I don't learn enough now to hold her, hang me for a fool!"

He stood awhile, gazing jealously at the scattered trees that, leafless as they were, foiled his curiosity, and here, pressing in upon the gardens, there retreating

to a greater distance, hid the secret that he must win. He considered the possibility of following the two, but he decided that the chances were too much against him. He did not know the woodland and could not count on surprising them. He contented himself with taking his hat and riding-coat, and thus prepared he awaited their return. "Let me but have a good look at my lady," he thought, "and if she does not give away the secret I'm less clever than I think."

He had to wait some time. He saw the governess come in, but intent on higher game he paid no heed to her. At last he caught the flutter of a woman's dress in the distance, now appearing between the trees, now masked by a clump of hollies, and he acted. With a languid air he lounged across the hall and outside paused for a moment before the house, as if undecided which way to turn. Then carelessly swinging his cane he sauntered away, and met Lady Ellingham a furlong or so from the house.

Secretly he clapped himself on the back, for a single glance assured him that she was not herself. A less suspicious eye must have remarked her flushed cheeks and over-bright eyes; she met him, moreover, with an embarrassment singular in one so cold and self-contained. He chuckled to himself, confirmed in his worst impressions—this lily too was not without its stain! But he took care to mask his suspicions under an easy address.

"I see you have been taking exercise," he began. "I came home early. My gun played me tricks and put me out of temper. But I am rewarded by this meeting. I hope I may have the pleasure of accompanying you to the house."

Her tapping foot—they had both come to a stand—betrayed her impatience. "Pray don't do so," she said. "Don't let me deprive you of your walk. I shall be at the house in a minute."

"I was merely strolling for pleasure."

"Then do continue," she answered with decision. But he saw that her eyes avoided his and that her breast still heaved with the swell of a half-spent storm. "Do not let me divert you," she added, with an effort at civility.

With that she would have passed on, but he did not give way. He judged that it was time to unmask his battery. "You look a little disturbed," he said, with solicitude. "The woods are lonely. Nothing has occurred to alarm you, I trust? You have not met with any impertinent who has ventured——"

"Oh dear no!" she rejoined. "Nothing of the kind." But though she spoke with calmness, her changing colour betrayed a distress very unusual with her, and as she raised her hand to her mouth he saw that the hand shook. A little more, and he fancied that she would break down.

Such signs meant much in such a woman. They confirmed all that Ould suspected, and he looked in the direction whence she had come. "If I thought so—if I thought, Lady Ellingham, that any one had," he said, "I would soon——"

"Oh dear no!" she repeated eagerly. "Nothing of the kind. I have perhaps walked—a little too quickly." And suddenly changing her tactics she invited him to return with her. "If you really were not meaning to go far?"

He read her motive—she feared that if he went on he would discover the person with whom she had been in company. But he knew that already and it suited him to comply. He offered his arm, and, having learned to his cost that he was no favourite with her, he was strengthened in his suspicions by the docility with which she accepted it as well as by the unsteadiness of the hand that rested on his arm.

Anew he patted himself on the back. He held her secret and in due time he would use it, and make his market of it. But the present was not the time,

the secret would keep, and for the moment he refrained from pressing her further. In the hall he parted politely from her, trusting that she would speedily recover from her fatigue : and he went up to his room, whistling softly. He hardly knew whether he was better pleased with his own acumen, or with the prize on which he counted to reward it. But a little added proof would not be unwelcome, nor difficult to find now that he knew in what direction to look ; and when he had that he would move. For the present, silence and open eyes. He was a man who liked to work in the dark, to lay his mine deep, and to apply the spark only when success was assured.

But the Colonel had left one thing out of his count. He was politic when cool, but he was also one to whom his wit and the use of it were a constant temptation. He could not be long in company without desiring to shine, nor long among his fellows without seeking occasion to provoke them. And a disclosure made an evening or two later as the men, flushed with wine, were rising from the table, a disclosure that threatened his well-laid plans, proved too much for his prudence.

It was Sir Austin who laid the train. "What's this about that handsome fellow of Bodmin's ?" he asked, as he got a little unsteadily to his feet, the sherry decanter in his hand. "Going, my girl tells me. Is it true, Fred ?"

"He's gone," my lord replied, shortly for him.

"Gone ? Gone away ? Yoicks !" Lord Robert crowed. "What's he been up to ? Weeping virtue and aged father tearing hair, eh ? That it ? And immaculate Fred sitting in judgment as lord of the soil ?"

"Something of the kind," my lord grunted, as he turned towards the door. 'Come, it's too late for the drawing-room, you've overstayed your welcome there, and you've punished the cellar enough ! Who's for faro ?"

"Faro?" Ould repeated with a sneer. Like the others he had taken rather more wine than was good for him. "No, d—n faro! Let's hear a bit about Joseph —far more amusing! Who's the Potiphar's wife that has fled and left her garment with him?"

"Go to the devil!" my lord answered. "Come! Time, time!" He strolled out ahead of the company.

"Costive, eh?" Bobbie said with a tipsy wink.

"Very close," old Froyle agreed, raising his eyebrows.

"Deuced unlike him," said a guest, who had come in from outside. "What is the story? Bit of scandal?"

"There is no story," the Captain said. He threw down his napkin and moved towards the door. Then he seemed to change his mind and turned about, waiting for the others.

"Is it that handsome dandy that I've seen with the boy?" the strange guest asked.

"The same," Ould said, an angry glint in his eyes. "And if I may make a guess, I fancy the young Adonis has raised his eyes a bit above him—a good bit above him. And Fred——"

"What of Fred?" There was a very ominous note in the Captain's voice.

"Fred? Oh, Fred has opened his?" the Colonel sneered, his chagrin getting the better of his prudence.

The Captain made a hasty movement, but Bobbie struck in before him. "What? Opened his eyes?" he hiccoughed. "Lord, what a devilish joke! I'd give all the money I've lost at White's this twelvemonth to hear Fred holding forth as the moral man."

My lord put his head in at the door. "Whip up those sulkers, George," he said, out of patience. "Are you going to stay there all night?"

Sir Austin led the way out. Bobbie, still chuckling over Fred's morality, tailed after. The Captain held back as if to give place to Ould, who was the last to

move. But the moment they were alone, "Ould, what the devil did you mean?" he demanded.

"A little lower tone, if you please," the Colonel replied quietly, but there was an ugly look in his eyes. "By what, my friend?"

"By what you said of that fellow—looking above him?"

"Just what I said. And I'll wager he did not look for nothing!"

"Then," said the Captain slowly, "you're a d—d swab, Ould!" And taking up the sherry which Froyle had poured out but not drunk, he flung the wine in the Colonel's face. "And a liar besides!"

The Colonel took out his handkerchief. "Thank you," he said and wiped his face and stock. "Cockpit manners! But that's enough. Very good!"

"After you," the Captain said, and he stood aside, pointing to the door.

Ould bowed and went out before him, outwardly unmoved. The rencontre had sobered him, though it was not his first experience of the kind. But inwardly he was cursing himself for a babbling fool, who had thrown away such chances as remained to him. Whatever came of it, he saw that George and his own temper had spoiled his game.

CHAPTER XX

DOUBLE OR QUITS

WHEN Girardot learned on the morning after the surprise on the stairs that Rachel kept her room, he guessed that the Countess had betrayed his secret; and foreseeing that trouble of more than one kind might come of it, he cursed his luck. But of Rachel at any rate, and whatever the consequences, he did not despair, he was far from despairing. His experience of the frailer sisters and their ways was warrant for him that with tact and some eating of humble pie he might regain both his influence and her confidence; and regain them under conditions which would make his final triumph the more easy and certain.

But to effect anything he must get at the girl, he must see her, for it was only by his powers of persuasion and his personal charm that he could work. And this he failed to do. To a question casually dropped to Priscilla, the answer was that Miss South was not well; and when, venturing on a stronger step, he sent Rachel a note by the schoolroom maid, ostensibly about a book, the note was returned to him unopened. He received it as if all were right, and with a word of regret that the young lady still ailed. But Priscilla's solemn face warned him that he was suspected, and he dared go no further, for with all his audacity he shrank from addressing the Countess; to whom for the rest he was careful to give a wide berth. He could only wait and watch.

But with growing impatience, for he had not been

wont to fail, or to be denied. He had taken what he fancied where he found it, desiring things not too delicate, and telling himself that without these stolen pleasures he would find his dull life intolerable. Now he saw the bird that he had captured escaping from the net, and the charm of its plumage grew on him with each moment of uncertainty. The prospect of disappointment blew passion to a white heat, and that which had begun as an idle fancy now possessed him. He pictured Rachel in every desirable light that experience suggested, and was consumed with longing, which seven or eight days of suspense, during which he neither saw her nor heard of her, did but aggravate. He persuaded himself that he had never loved before, never known the pain of a thwarted pursuit; and beside this little girl, with whom he had intended to amuse an idle hour, beside the pale face that only a certain piquancy and a pair of soft eyes saved from insignificance, the rustic, full-blown beauties whom he had pursued lost their charm and faded to nothingness.

Desire began to upset his balance. His eyes lost their sparkle, his voice its lightness, he ceased to jest. He cut short the boy's lessons and exhausted his strength in tramping long hours through the forest, angrily cutting down the undergrowth with his cane, and now cursing the girl, now pleading with her. He who had played with others was now the plaything and sport of his own feelings. He was possessed.

But sooner or later, he told himself, she must appear, he must have his opportunity. She could not always hide herself. And on the eighth day, when he had begun to despair, he had at last the luck to see her slip from the house by the side door. The truth was that Lady Ellingham had taken her to task and adjured her to rouse herself and to go out; and Rachel had done so, choosing a time when in the ordinary course he would be at his early dinner. But the tutor had long lost appetite save for the pursuit; his only desire now

was to fight the matter out, to test his influence, and, as he hoped and believed, to prove its potency.

On fire as he was—and impatience consumed him—he let a short time elapse, and then he followed. He cared little who saw him, yet across the open he preserved some decency. But as soon as the sheltering trees hid him, he lengthened his stride, he came near to running. He did not dwell on what he would say when he overtook her—he had passed beyond that. She had given him her first love, he had held her in his arms, he had pressed his kisses on her face ; and experience assured him that these things formed a bond that in nine cases out of ten disarmed resistance. And she was so innocent, so soft, so yielding, he was sure that she had only to feel his nearness, and his power, with a few sophistries, would be restored.

At last he saw the flutter of her skirt between the trees, and almost running he came up with her. Breathlessness gave the necessary quiver to his voice. " Rachel ! Rachel ! " he cried. He was pale and beads of perspiration, cold as the day was, stood on his brow.

She heard, and turned with a movement of alarm ; but it was he who was the more startled. For the girl who faced him in this wintry clearing of the wood was not the old Rachel, the Rachel of blushes and shy tremulous smiles, but a white thin-faced girl whose eyes, enlarged by the dark shadows under them, did not so much reproach as accuse him. He felt the check, he could not but feel it, but he did what he could to recover himself. " Rachel ! Rachel ! " he repeated, holding out his hands to her—and there was appeal enough and desperate appeal in his voice to touch any woman. " Oh, my dear, my dear, it has been terrible not to see you, not to hear you, not to know how you fared ! " And he would have taken her that moment in his arms, as if he felt no doubt of her.

But she looked at him with such solemn eyes, in a silence so heavy, that he hesitated. To cover the

check, "And you—ah, but I see that you too have suffered," he continued. "You have suffered too, Rachel! I see it. You have been ill, wretched, anxious, as I have been. Have thought of me as I have thought of you!"

And still she did not answer. She only looked at him with sad condemning eyes. At last, "Please to go away," she said.

This was worse than he had feared, but he strove to put a bold face on it. "Go?" he exclaimed in apparent surprise—and God knows there was no lack of passion in his voice. "Go and leave you, now that I have found you! Now that at last I am with you! Now that at last I have the joy of seeing you, of hearing your voice, of touching if it be but the hem of your gown! Oh, never, you do not mean it! You cannot mean it, cannot mean that a few spiteful words, a jealous woman's tale have so changed you, have robbed me of all that I had won! You have more heart, more constancy than that! Dare, oh, my dear, dare to be guided by them!" And again with hungry eyes he would have taken her in his arms.

But Rachel stepped back. "Don't touch me!" she said. "Please to go away."

If she had scolded him he could have met it. If she had told him that he had sought her ruin and that her love was dead, he could have argued with her, he could have dealt with her. But that "Don't touch me" and her dumb accusing eyes confounded the man. He saw that here was no play-acting, no virtuous pretence, but a real shrinking. And though he replied, and with passion enough, "But this is nonsense! Nonsense, Rachel! My darling, you cannot throw me off like this! There is too much, too much between us!" he already felt the numbing hand of defeat.

"There is nothing between us," she answered in a low voice. "I have nothing to say to you."

"Oh, but——"

"I know the truth. Will you please to go away."

If the blood had risen to her face he would have known what to do, for he still believed that if he could hold her in his arms she would melt. But in drawing back she had placed a small bush between them, and though they were alone and she was in his power, he could not chase her from bush to bush.

Force, then, he kept for a last resort, and he bent himself to move her by the strength of an appeal, to which with any other woman his haggard eager face must have given weight. "You are not fair to me!" he cried. "You believe all that is said against me! Said by a jealous, a spiteful, a wicked woman! At least hear me, you must, you shall hear me, you shall hear my defence. What has been told you, what tales, what lies——"

"Are you married?" She had but the bare question to put.

And that bare question, cold and curt, upset him. He hesitated. If he lied, would it avail him? The lie would be carried to Lady Ellingham and might be fatal to him in other ways. He tried to parry the thrust. "After a fashion, I am," he said. "I confess it. Most unhappily, most unfortunately, most tragically—married."

Rachel shivered. "Will you please to go away then."

"But, Rachel, Rachel," he answered, his voice throbbing with feeling, "how hard! How can you be so hard, so cruel, so pitiless? At least hear me! Let me explain, let me tell you how slight, how shadowy, how unreal the bond is! Let me tell you my story, and instead of condemning me, you will feel for me, pity me, you will console me. Let me tell you——"

"I wish to hear nothing." She shivered as she spoke. "Will you go away, sir."

"Not till you have heard me! No!" His temper,

spurred by balked desire, was mastering him. "No, I will not!"

"Then I will go," she said.

But he stood in the way. "No," he said doggedly. "Not till you have heard me. No, I will not, I will not let you go! You owe me that at least," he continued with indignation. "Does all that you have sworn to me, all your affection, all your woman's love, come only to this—to throw me off at a word! Oh, my dear," and again with a pathetic descent to prayer, he held out his hands to her, "have pity on me! Rachel, Rachel, say that it is a dream, a nightmare from which we awaken! Say that nothing shall come between us, nor part us! There is but love in the world. There is but love, and beside it nothing matters, nothing serves, all is but form and show, not worth an hour of happiness—of such happiness as we may still know together! Oh, my dear," and his voice quivered with feeling, "be true, be true to yourself. Have courage, have faith, shake yourself free from the prejudices—But I see——" breaking off with bitterness as he saw her recoil—"You fear me! You shrink from me!"

"No," she cried with indignation, "I shrink, sir, from myself! That I have let you—that I have suffered at your hands what I have, that I have been so blind, so dull! But how could you, how could you—when it was not you that I loved, but my own fancy, and as far from you as heaven from earth! And now—now that I have told you, I beg you, I implore you to leave me."

"I will not!" he cried. "No!"

"Mr. Girardot——"

"No," he insisted savagely. "No, I will not." He foresaw defeat, and disappointment maddened him. The cruel instincts that are ever a part of such a passion awoke in him. "Not until I have more than this, ma'am! This is talk! It may deceive another, but

it does not deceive me. You are not a clod or a stone, though you would have me think it, but flesh and blood! You can feel and thrill and love, and I have proved it! You are a woman, and if with my arms about you you can still swear that you do not love me——"

"But I do swear it!" she cried. The wildness of his words and the look in his eyes frightened her at last. She glanced aside, seeking a way of escape.

He seized the advantage. "But I don't believe you!" he rejoined, and before she could evade him he had seized her by the arm and was drawing her to him. "Now," he cried exultantly, "now I'll prove you wrong, my lady! You don't escape me so easily! No, it is no use to struggle."

He was dragging her, fiercely resisting, into his embrace, when "Stop!" said a cold authoritative voice. "What is this? What does this mean? Mr. Girardot! Surely you forget yourself!"

"The devil!" he exclaimed, his passion quenched in an instant. He let the girl go. And as she stepped back, white, panting, her eyes wide, her hand pressed to her breast, he turned and saw Lady Ellingham, who, her colour high, stood calmly awaiting his answer. As he did not reply, "It seems I come in season," she said. "Miss South, I saw this gentleman follow you and I came after you, suspecting something of this. You had better go home if you are equal to it. I will myself hear his explanation."

The blood flooded Rachel's face—what humiliation he had brought on her! But she bowed her head and as quickly as her shaking knees and palpitating heart would let her she moved away in silence and took the homeward path. My lady waited until she was out of earshot, then she turned to the tutor. "Was this another appointment?" she asked with irony.

"It was not."

"Chance, I suppose, sir?"

"No," he rejoined defiantly. "If you must know, ma'am, I followed her."

"And meant to—to make the most of the occasion, it seems."

The surprise had been so complete that he had not yet recovered his self-possession. But his wits were already at work: already he saw that in a position so serious it might be as well, and all that was left to him, to risk fortunes already desperate on a single cast. The Countess had followed them—why? And this was the second time that she had followed them—why? His vanity cried aloud for compensation and at the same time suggested to him where he might find it; and audacious, impudent as the idea was, and amazing the *volte-face*, he had never been wanting either in audacity or impudence.

"But now," the Countess continued with severity as he did not answer, "now, Mr. Girardot, be good enough to understand that there must be an end of this. I have had—too much patience, sir. You are of his lordship's choice, you are here at his will and by his appointment, and I have so far been loath to interfere. But this is too much. This is a cruel, wicked, unmanly pursuit, and it must stop. It shall go no further under my roof."

He could see that she meant it and that he must either be crushed or he must risk his last stake. He bared his head and with a characteristic gesture he tossed back the hair from his forehead. He knew that the action became him. "You do not ask," he said gloomily, "what it means?"

"I fear I know—only too well, sir."

"But not how it arose."

"I am not concerned with that. I am only concerned——"

"But it is you—you who are concerned with that!" he cried, breaking in impulsively, and turning his fine eyes full upon her, those eyes whose pleading had done

so much execution. "It is you, ma'am, you and no other, who are the cause of this—this folly, this madness, this delirium, for it is no more."

"I?" She could not believe her ears.

But he had burned his boats, he was beyond the fear of her displeasure. "Yes, you," he replied hardily. "You and you only are the cause of this, of all this. He who falls from a height will catch at any stay, grasp at any straw, stop himself where he can, high or low. Will, repelled by a queen, be caught by a handmaid! I swear that it has been so with me, and you know it. Deny it if you can, ma'am. You must have known how it was with me, how mad I was, and how unhappy in my madness this twelvemonth past! How high I aspired, how greatly I dared! For if my lips were mute, and my tongue was dumb, my eyes at least must have told you the truth."

She flushed darkly. "Mr. Girardot," she said, "if you mean what you seem to mean——"

"I do mean it!" he retorted, "and you do not doubt it, though you pretend to! For a year you and you only have filled my thoughts, owned my heart, enslaved me! Have been the world and all the world and more to me! This," he flung a contemptuous gesture after Rachel, "served for a cloak, a cover, but it could not blind you. For I am flesh and blood and you would not own me, you despised me and looked down on me, and desperate——"

"Desperate? No, but mad! You must be mad," the Countess cried incredulously. "Oh, the audacity of it, the vileness of it! I cannot, sir, believe my ears. When you have just, when you have this moment—and heaven above, what reason, what ground have I ever given you that you should believe that you could——"

"Ground?" he retorted savagely. "You? None, ma'am. But my lord—every ground. Ground to build as high as heaven! Did you think that any man

with the blood of a man could stand by unmoved and see how he treated you? How he neglected you? How he betrayed you? How he outraged you? You might be patience itself, you might let his contempt sink you as low in the dust as your beauty set you high, yet did you think that any man worthy of the name could look on from day to day and bear it? Could see you so treated, so abandoned, so despised, without kindling? Could—no, ma'am, I will speak though I lose all—could be witness of your life from day to day without pitying you, without adoring you, without longing to devote his poor all to you? If you thought this, then you have never known a man!"

"I have never known a man—a bad man," she cried viciously, "until now!"

"But still a man," he retorted. "And he who owns you, who dishonours you, who sets the cheapest above you—is no man!"

"Oh, abominable!" she cried, and in the impotence of her anger she struck the silver-headed cane that she carried so violently on the ground that it splintered. "Do you know that if I were a man I would kill you! Your love—oh, heaven!"

"It would be heaven if you returned it!"

"If I returned it? If?" The contempt in my lady's voice was beyond words. "Hear me, listen! Listen, you—you miserable creature who can turn in a moment from the maid to the mistress and think your shift is not seen! Than the love—the word blisters my lips—of such a man I would rather bear my husband's hate! I would cherish it, I would nurse it! I would rather have him though he beat me, starved me, shamed me, set a hundred women above me—than you! He is at least and at worst a gentleman, while you—but I soil my lips with you, I stain myself every moment that I stay in your company, look at you, hear you! That you—you should presume to me! You? To me! But enough. Enough, sir! Let me not see you

again. Leave this place at once, leave it this night! Make any pretext you please—you have store of them. But go, go, sir. For if I hear that you remain to-morrow I shall tell all to my husband and you will be whipped from the house. Oh, you are too much! You are impossible! You are incredible!"

And without a backward look she turned and swept away. "Oh, vile! Vile!" she flung over her shoulder. She panted with rage.

He might have darted after her and laid hands on her as he had laid hands on Rachel, for they were alone and no help was near. But he was beaten. The spirit and force of her denunciation had overwhelmed him, and the idea did not even occur to him. And—it went for something perhaps—he did not love her.

Instead he stood looking after her, and "D—n!" he whispered in an ecstasy of chagrin. He had staked all and lost all. But it was of Rachel's pale face and tremulous lips that he thought.

CHAPTER XXI

THE BOWLING-GREEN

LADY ANN could sleep like a dormouse. She could sleep for ten hours at a stretch without moving so much as would free the torrent of her inky mane from her night-cap. But like most children she awoke early, was early afoot, and thenceforward became a torment to housemaids, who with their brooms and pails desired nothing so much as to have the house to themselves. She had a way of sliding silently down the balusters and jumping on Jane's back as she swept, or of slyly pinching Martha's defenceless calves as she scrubbed, which was very disturbing. Or she would invade Mrs. Jemmett's room and plunder her buttered toast—such toast, hot and crisp, as the dining-room never saw—and be gone before the good woman discovered her loss. All was game that came to Ann's net, but on these cold winter mornings, sport was scarce, and the best-natured housemaid prone to be crusty.

Anything out of the common, therefore, was a god-send to Ann, and when on her way downstairs two mornings later she spied a gentleman descending before her, she bounded down upon him, overjoyed. "By gum, Uncle George," she cried, seizing his arm and hanging affectionately upon it, "why are you up? And where are you going? I'll get my hood and come with you."

The Captain turned upon her. "No, you won't!" he said. "Sheer off and go back to bed, monkey! I'm on business."

"Back to bed?" she replied with scorn. "Why, I'm dressed. I'm *jiggered* if I do. Why!" and her eyes grew big with surprise. "Here's another! Bobby dear, what is it? Why are you up? You look as if you were going to a funeral!"

"Then it will be yours!" the beau answered more sharply than even Uncle George had. He glanced at the Captain. "Here's a bore," he said—bore was a new word much in fashion then. "You run away and play, baby."

"I will—with you!" Ann returned. She danced derisively up and down and defied them both.

The men's eyes met. Then something in Bobbie's appearance seemed to strike the other. "Have you got—what we want?" he asked.

"Confound it!" Lord Robert exclaimed, conscience-stricken. "What an ass I am! If I haven't forgotten the necessaries!" He turned and bounded up the stairs at much more than his usual pace.

When he was gone, "See here, Ann," the Captain said, and he stooped and kissed the child—a thing so uncommon, for his usual caress was a twist of the ear, that it impressed her more than the gravity of his tone. "You can't come with us—we're on business. So go back upstairs, that's a good girl. And when your mother comes down, give her my love—in case I'm not back to-day, you know."

"Why?" Ann cried aghast, for Uncle George was the first of all her favourites, ranking even before Charles, the first footman. "An't you coming back?"

"Of course I am. But do you give her that message when she comes down—if I am delayed, d'you see."

Ann yielded reluctantly. "Oh, well," she said. "All right, Uncle George, I'll go. But you're a pig not to let me go with you." And her feet lagged as she crawled up the stairs. It was too bad of him. But on the landing she met Lord Robert hurrying down, and her eye was caught by something that he carried hidden

under his coat. "Now what's that he's carrying?" Ann's quick wits asked, as she flung a gibe at him in passing. "It is something he doesn't want me to see." And her curiosity aroused by these unusual proceedings, she watched them leave the hall by the garden door. Then she dawdled away to her mother's room, instead of waiting to give the message when my lady came down.

Lady Ellingham had that moment left her bed and was in her wrapper, her feet bare. "Mother," Ann said, firmly prepared to tease until she learned what she wanted to know. "What's it all about? Why are Uncle George and Bobbie up so early? And what are the necessaries?"

Her mother was thrusting one white foot into a slipper. "Are they up?" she asked. "Already?"

"Yes. And what are the necessaries, mother?"

"The necessaries, child? What do you mean?" My lady was feeling in a leisurely way for the other slipper.

"It is what Bobbie called them."

"My dear, I wish you would call him Lord Robert. You are really too old to—were they going out?"

"Yes, and Uncle George told me to give his love to you if he wasn't back when you came down."

My lady looked startled. "But he's not leaving to-day?" she exclaimed, her attention caught at last. "I've not heard anything about it. Tell me, child. Did he say he was going?"

"Oh, he's coming back," Ann replied carelessly. "But, mother, what did he mean by the necessaries? Bobbie had them under his coat, and he took precious good care that I shouldn't see them, the pig!"

"They've gone out together?"

"Yes. I shouldn't think they are out of sight yet."

With one foot still bare the Countess went quickly to the nearest window—her room looked on the garden. She drew back the curtain. She was just in time to see

two heads pass bobbing along a side walk which was divided from the open lawn by a box-hedge—pass and disappear.

It was not the nearest way to the gate at the foot of the gardens, for that was at the end of the middle walk, but it was the most private way and my lady's face when she turned from the window frightened Ann. "What was it like that Lord Robert was carrying?" she asked, and she grasped the child's arm to compel her attention.

"A flat box, mother. It looked——"

"And Colonel Ould left yesterday!" my lady exclaimed. "Oh, what—what can we do? If I were dressed!" Then, pushing the child from her, "Ann, run—run after them! But no, no, stop!" She raised her hands to her head with a gesture of distraction that alarmed the girl. "Stop! They would not heed you! And the men? I know them, they will do nothing!"

"But what is it?" Ann whimpered, clinging to her mother. She was bewildered as well as frightened. "What is it, mother? What is the matter?"

"They are going to fight! Yes, they are going to fight and—no, Ann, stay where you are, you will do no good! Who can? ah, who? They will not heed a servant, but—yes, she may delay them. She may if I am quick!" And without a thought of her hair tucked under her night-cap or of her bare foot, my lady sprang to the door, opened it, and hurried along the corridor and up the grand staircase, which certainly had never seen her in that disarray before. The frightened child followed, questioning her, but in vain. My lady did not pause until she had swept through the swing-door and stood in the passage before the door of the governess's bedroom. She knocked sharply—knocked again without waiting for an answer.

"Miss South! Miss South!" she cried in a voice that haste rendered breathless—the voice that men use when they cry "Fire! Fire!" "Are you dressed?"

The girl was dressed, and taking the alarm had the door open in a second. She saw Lady Ellingham in her wrapper, and she stared.

But my lady clapped her hands. "Thank God, you are dressed!" she said, pouring out her words one on the top of another. "Listen! There is mischief, terrible mischief! A duel! They are going to fight, and there is no one but you to go! Go, for God's sake, after them! Stay them, delay them—do something, girl. I will follow. Oh!" as Rachel instead of moving stood paralysed by this sudden demand, "don't stand there, but go!"

"But who? Where?" Rachel stammered.

"Oh, what does it matter?" with a gesture of despair. "George! Captain Dunstan! Beyond the lower garden! The bowling-green—it has happened there before! Go, girl, don't lose a minute! Keep them in talk till I come. Oh!" she cried, wholly forgetting herself in her distraction—and no one could have been less like the Lady Ellingham of every day—"if I am to lose my only friend! My only friend!"

The appeal and her despair shook Rachel into action. "Yes, yes, I will go!" she cried. She seized a cape that hung on the door within reach of her hand. "I will do what I can! But I fear, ma'am, they will not listen to me!"

"They will! They will!" The Countess clapped her hands. "Don't heed what they say! They cannot fight before you. Keep them, keep them!" She flung the words after the girl who was already at the stair-head. "I will follow! Oh, how wicked, how stupid men are!"

Rachel flew down the stairs. She was outside the house, facing the bite of the frosty morning; she was racing, a small flying figure, down the middle walk of the garden before she had steadied her thoughts sufficiently to reflect on what was before her. Her first impulse was to rebel. Why, why had this been

cast on her, ill-equipped as she was to meet it, and unequal to thrusting herself forward or imposing herself on others ? Her nerves shrank, and she sickened at the thought of her task. But she must go through with it now, and she did not slacken her pace ; and the first moment of recoil past, the issues at stake claimed her, cried shame on her that she should have hesitated. Life or death hung on her courage, depended on her speed—the life of one whom my lady loved, and who brusque, rough, masterful as he had been to her—and there had been times when she almost hated him—had with all his arbitrariness been kind and human !

Now he was in danger that she might avert, and in danger how great the Countess's distress proved ! For my lady's sake she must hurry ! It would be time to think what she would do when she reached the spot.

She ran down the steps to the lower level, and hastened at speed through the orchard to the farther gate. It was of iron, heavy to open, and it was only by the use of all her strength that she got it open. She passed through it, she was in the park. The bowling-green, a sunk green space enclosed by trees, lay away to her left at a distance of nearly a quarter of a mile. The path to it diverged from the main track about a hundred yards from the gardens, and already, what with her haste and the trouble she had had with the gate, she was faltering. Her breath was failing, her heart pounded, her skirts dragged her down. She had to walk, her eyes searching desperately the open ground before her.

But the thought of the issues that hung on her speed goaded her ; she ran again, walked, ran anew. By this time she was near the place where the path turned off, but the scattered trees were beginning to dance before her eyes, she was giddy, her sight was failing. And then, oh joy ! at the junction she saw a man. He stepped out to meet her.

" Are you out to stop 'em, miss ? " he asked, and he

too seemed to see the need of haste. "This way! This way, miss! But you must be quick!" He beckoned to her to follow him along the main path.

"Am I in time?" she gasped. The man's company was some support.

"If you are quick, miss!" he replied. "Come along!"

She responded bravely, for her second wind had come, and she hurried after the man, her eyes questioning each turn of the path—it ran across the open but on either hand were clumps of trees that masked the view. But when she had followed her guide a hundred yards without result, doubts began to assail her. The Countess had said—the bowling-green! The bowling-green! She had not seemed to doubt that that would be the place. And in a moment Rachel jumped to the conclusion that the man was tricking her—that he had been posted there to guard against intrusion.

She acted on the thought. Without a word she left the path for the open sward and made across it towards the belt of trees that fringed and concealed the bowling-green. Her guide called after her, argued, scolded. But she did not heed. Picking up her skirts, she stumbled on over the rough turf, and though she could have collapsed with fatigue, she toiled on, making such way that she reached the trees before the man who had started after her overtook her.

"You're all wrong, miss!" he swore. "You're losing time! It is not here, I tell you!"

But she turned a deaf ear. She caught the sound of voices before her—of one voice at any rate, sharp, loud, insistent; it seemed to be giving an order. Heavens, if at the last she should be too late! She did not think what she would say or what she would do. She stumbled on, burst through the laurels beneath the fringe of trees, saw before her the open sunk space, saw figures stationed here and there upon it.

"Stop! Stop!" she cried. "Oh, stop!"

But her voice had lost its power and only those nearest to her heard her. She had time to see that the figure standing stiff and erect abreast of her—for she had emerged towards one end of the green—was Captain Dunstan, that he was levelling a pistol, and that he started as she spoke. Then the pistols cracked, a tiny jet of smoke eddied before her. She saw him stagger, but he kept his feet.

"Ah!"

There was an old bench beside her, and she clutched the back of it, supporting herself. She saw Lord Robert and another man step to the Captain's side, and for a second or two she was still in the dark. Then she saw Lord Robert pass his arm round him, heard the beau's words, "Bad luck!" and she understood.

"It's nothing! Nonsense!" That was the Captain speaking. "There, let me be, man! I can——" He tried to push the others away, but he swayed on his feet.

"No, you can't, sir!" the second person who had come to his aid replied. He supported the wounded man on the other side. "It is not much," he continued briskly, "but it's enough. If you can walk to that seat? Now, my dear sir, don't exert yourself. Lean on us! Leave it to us!"

They moved, half carrying, half supporting the Captain towards the seat by which Rachel stood. Midway to it, and while, fascinated, she watched them, a fourth man joined them and exchanged a few words with them, raised his hat and walked quickly away. But Rachel had no eyes for him. Her whole attention was given to the group of three who approached the seat. As they drew near she fell back a pace or two.

The Captain still grumbled. "Confound you, why didn't you let me be? I could have held for another shot!" Then, as they let him down on the seat, "I've had worse. Why didn't you let me be? If you'd let me be——"

"Nonsense, sir," said the doctor, for such Rachel

guessed him to be. "Might have been worse, but it is enough. Keep still and don't try to help yourself. We'll soon have you comfortable."

"I lost him for a moment." That was the Captain's voice again.

"Yes, yes, I saw," the doctor said. "We all saw. A bad business. Don't talk. Let me see what it is."

Rachel watched them slitting up the arm of his coat and cutting away his shirt. His linen was bedabbled with blood, but to her surprise she felt no inclination to recoil.

The surgeon examined, felt, probed with deft fingers. "No great harm!" he said cheerfully. "Just winged! But I must have you in bed before I can do more." He looked over his shoulder. He saw the man who had intercepted Rachel. "Run to the house," he said. "Go to the back. Say nothing, but bring a chair and two men. Hurry, man!"

"Where did my shot go?" That was the Captain again, his voice perceptibly weaker.

"Wide," said Bobbie. His eyes travelled to the girl.

"I'll put on a dressing," said the doctor. He did it rapidly. "Here, if I had something to pass round him —this bandage is too short." He looked round him, holding the bandage in place. He seemed to be at a loss.

She did not stay to think. She unwound the sash that she wore about her waist and held it out, mutely offering it. Her eyes met the Captain's, and she shrank again out of sight. But not until the doctor had taken the sash.

"Excellent!" he said, with a sharp glance at her. "Excellent, ma'am! The very thing!"

"Ay," said Lord Robert in a tone not meant for her ear. "A hair of the dog that bit him, eh. If she hadn't come up just then——"

"Oh, unlucky, d—d unlucky," the doctor replied. "Well, well!"

Something more passed between them that poor Rachel, now more than suspecting the unlucky part she had played, did not catch. Then Lord Robert turned to her. "If you are able," he said courteously, "will you return to the house and tell the housekeeper that Captain Dunstan's bed will be needed?"

"A mattress, not the bed," the doctor corrected. "And hot water and sponges, ma'am. And perhaps you could break it to her ladyship."

Rachel assented, but her eyes asked a question.

The doctor understood. "You can tell her ladyship that it is nothing serious," he said.

Rachel hastened away, bearing so much of comfort. But she was aware now that her unlucky appearance had distracted the Captain at the critical moment. And they all knew it! She longed to hide her head and her failure. And if he died? That was a thing too terrible to think of!

By the garden gate she met Lady Ellingham, hurrying with a pale face to the scene, Ann hanging on her arm. She had learned the result, and Rachel was thankful that she could give the doctor's assurance. But that done, the girl could not let well alone. In her candour she must needs blurt out the truth. "And I am afraid, I am afraid, Lady Ellingham, that it was my fault," she said.

"Yours? Your fault?" My lady bent a pale frowning face on the trembling girl. "How? What do you mean?"

"I called out—when they were just going to fire. And I am afraid that it—it put him off."

"Then you were a fool!" Lady Ellingham exclaimed cruelly, and without a second look went off, leaving Rachel to proceed more unhappy than before. Why hadn't she looked before she spoke? Waited, done anything but what she had done?

Then she met my lord, also hurrying, with a clouded face and his stock in his hand. She gave him the

doctor's message. He nodded, d—d Ould with unction, and ran on, while she, her knees trembling under her, sought Mrs. Jemmett's room. By this time the house was alarmed and in commotion, but she found the housekeeper and did her errand.

"A plague on them nasty pistols!" Mrs. Jemmett said. "I wish they were all at the bottom of the Red Sea! Where is he hit, miss?"

"In the chest, I am afraid," Rachel said with a shudder.

"Is he spitting blood, miss?"

"No, I don't think so."

"Then he'll do, and thank God for that! But it's always the best that's taken. I could burn that Colonel and joyful."

She bustled away with that. She had no thought to give to anyone so insignificant as the governess. But fortunately, as the girl dragged herself across the hall, she met Bowles, and Bowles, though he too had his hands full, had an eye for feminine distress. He bade her stay, fetched a glass of Madeira and forced her to drink it. "Now you go and lie down, miss," he said. "It's all you are fit for, and you can do no good."

So at last she was free to lock her door and review in misery of spirit what she had done and the part that she had played in the catastrophe; and the unhappy issue coming on the top of so much that had tried her, and aged her, that had snapped alike youth and buoyancy, seemed to be the last blow of misfortune. She felt that this was the climax.

She did not suspect that it was in truth the beginning of recovery. She did not guess that the call on her nerves had done her good and not harm, that it had shaken her out of herself and her own troubles, and had gone some way and not a little way to divert the trend of her thoughts. Like a freshening breeze, blowing into a sick-room and expelling unhealthy vapours, it had cleansed her mind of obsessions; and thrusting

before it more serious issues, had forced her to think of life and death as facts of import, of import graver than either a man's treachery or a girl's weakness. It was a tonic, sharp, but wholesome.

CHAPTER XXII

THE RETURN OF A SASH

FOR an hour or two there was some doubt how it might go with the wounded man, and the anxiety which was felt, below stairs as well as above, spoke well for his popularity. At a time when many of the characteristics of the fop still clung to his class, the bluff manners that the Captain had learned at sea might have incurred dislike ; and in a household strange to his ways he would probably have been condemned offhand. But in the house which had known him both as the Master George, who with pinched lips but dry eyes had exchanged the comforts of home for the tender mercies of the cockpit, and as the Captain, posted after the 1st of June and proved amid the flaming glories of the Nile, he was regarded more indulgently ; and this although man and maid flew at his bidding, and he was known to be capable on occasion of hurling a boot at his servant's head. But the man had served with him ; and if Onions's stories of the state in which his commander lived, and the awful and lonely dignity he maintained when afloat, meant anything, the boot should have taken high rank as a compliment.

To quote Onions : " Orders, bless your innocence, man ! He don't give no orders ! He just looks, and the swabs of lieutenants slips down to leeward and sings out a-trembling ! Orders ! No, no more than the King in his crown ! All as you'd ever hear in a twelve-month'd be 'Three dozen, my man !' or 'Close action !' says he, and shuts up his glass, as you or me might spit on our hands. 'Lay her aboard !' says he. 'The men may cheer now !' "

However, an hour or two put an end to doubt, the bullet was extracted, and by noon the surgeon pronounced him weakened by loss of blood, but out of danger. The house breathed again, and turned with zest to the discussion of details. Onions, who had stood sentry at the parting of the paths, told his tale, and within an hour his story and the part that Rachel had played in it were in all mouths.

And below stairs only one conclusion was drawn from it: that the little governess was at the root of the trouble. Amazing, incredible! That trumpery! But what else could they think? Mrs. Jemmett alone declined to believe in the story, and scolded Bowles for upholding it.

"Nonsense, man!" she said. "D'you think the gentry has no eyes in their heads to quarrel about the likes of her! Or that that rake-hell of a Colonel that knows more than he ought of half the Lady Jennies in London—and light skirts they are, the one half of them!—would look at her! And the Captain who hasn't a word to throw at a petticoat, be it ever so! Though I'm thinking there's one ready enough to listen to him, and that's Miss Froyle, and no other."

"It's her eyes," said the butler sententiously.

"And you think that they quarrelled about them!"

"I wasn't there to see, ma'am," Bowles replied patiently. "All I say is, it looks like it."

Mrs. Jemmett rubbed her nose. "She's a pretty sly puss if it is so."

"Well, if you ask me, Mrs. J., there's more about her than you think for. What took Mr. Girardot off all of a sudden? You tell me that!"

Mrs. Jemmett stared. "Why, goodness gracious, man, you don't mean to tell me as she's carrying on with all three of 'em? And her with nothing to her and not half the looks of Jane the housemaid, that is good red and white at any rate!"

"Well, who lives the longest will see the most," said

Bowles. It was a favourite saying of his and earned him a reputation for foresight.

Meanwhile above stairs, where they should have known better, the theory won its way on higher authority. Naturally the first person to be questioned was Lord Robert. But the beau could say no more than that the Captain had flung a glass of wine in Ould's face, and that mediation had been out of the question. Further, that Ould's second had told him that there was a woman at the bottom of it; and that was all that Lord Robert could say.

But what woman? My lord, curious and foreseeing a lasting joke against his sedate brother, went to the fountain-head and, as soon as the Captain was in a condition to talk, put the question. "Deuced glad it's no worse, George," he said. "Devilish glad! But who's the lady? Not Charlotte Froyle, I'll go bail! Why, I'd as soon go to war about a piece of bread and butter—and dry at that."

Not seeing as clearly as he might have seen whither this was tending, Captain George hastened to clear Charlotte. "Miss Froyle?" he said with gusto. "Lord no!"

"Well, if it wasn't Charlotte, who was it?"

"Oh, stow it!" This time George spoke with irritation, his face, which was paler than usual, taking a tinge of colour.

"But put her out, and there's only—by gum, George!" My lord grinned abominably. "I see! The little governess, by Jove! So we weren't far wrong when we roasted you, eh? Damme, I'd a sort of a notion of it from the time she boarded you that morning—outside, you remember? And Ould, the old sinner, was trailing the same petticoat! Well, I am hanged!"

"Oh, stow it, Fred!" the Captain repeated uneasily. "And whatever you do, for God's sake keep a still tongue!" But he did not deny the charge, for he saw

now that my lady alone remained, and her name must be kept out at all costs. It would never do for Fred to learn that they had fought about her, while he who should have defended her honour stood aside and did nothing.

So presently down goes my lord bursting with the jest—never had he had such a pull over his Joseph of a brother as this!

It was such a good thing that, in spite of George's adjuration, he could not keep it to himself. As a rule he avoided a *tête-à-tête* with my lady much as he would have shunned a snow-bath in January. But this was so great a joke that for once he broke through a reserve that was born three parts of shame, and one part of a reluctance to leave the primrose paths in which his feet were entangled. He burst into her sitting-room and blurted out with great enjoyment the story of George's backsliding.

My lady was transfixed. For a moment she had entertained a darkling and most unwelcome suspicion that she was herself at the bottom of the trouble. Of this the news relieved her. But it wounded her in her affection for George and grieved her on his account; and, it lowered him in her eyes. Were no men to be trusted, then—were they all alike? And so frigidly did she listen that my lord, chafing at her prudery, was glad to beat a quick retreat. He went still mumbling his joke with apparent enjoyment, but—confound it!—how different she used to be, he thought. How gay, how responsive. And for a brief moment, as he looked back, the primrose paths lost their charm.

In Lady Ellingham's case the first result of this confidence was that she avoided her governess. She could not believe, knowing as she did the truth about the Girardot matter, that the girl was a party to this, or was truly to blame. But she was perplexed and suspicious. She had been prepared to thank Rachel frankly, and warmly, for her action of the morning, unfortunate as it

had turned out. But with this on her mind she refrained, and Rachel drew her own conclusions and was unhappy, taking silence for condemnation, and in her solitude dwelling on, and exaggerating, the mistake that she had made. She fancied that she read reproach even in Priscilla's eyes.

Ann, it is true, chose to regard her in the light of a heroine, and hung upon her a good deal. But as Ann's admiration took the form of questions, equally plain-spoken and embarrassing, it worried her more than it cheered her. In her life apart she became in these days a little of a republican, thinking bitterly of the divisions of rank and the cold manners of the great.

And then one morning a wonderful thing happened. Lady Ellingham appeared in the schoolroom at noon, and, without any greeting, "Miss South," she said, her tone constrained, "Captain Dunstan has been moved into my sitting-room to-day. He is well enough to sit up, and he wishes to see you. Perhaps you will come down with me now?"

Feeling that the world was nearing its end, Rachel murmured something—that she was glad that he was better—of course she would do anything——

"Very well," said my lady rather curtly. "Then will you follow me?"

Still wondering much, Rachel did so, and a minute later found herself face to face with a Captain Dunstan who, in dressing-gown and slippers and with the tan gone from his face, looked strangely unlike himself. He bobbed up from his easy chair and bobbed down again. "Thank you, Kitty," he said. "Sit there, Miss South. I got my lady to fetch you just to—to tell you what I thought of you, d'you see. Well, d'you know, you made a precious mess of that business, young lady? More haste, less speed, eh?" He smiled grimly. "You will know better another time, and not sheer in where you are not wanted, I fancy."

"I am very—sorry," she murmured meekly. Lady

Ellingham's eyes, pitilessly fixed upon her, confused her. "But indeed I did my best."

"I believe you," he replied with a chuckle. "I am told that you ran like a hare, kicking up behind. Onions says a hare'd be nothing to it!"

"I hadn't time to think," Rachel pleaded, with a hot face.

"And so were just in time to play the devil with us, eh? And after all," he continued, with a queer searching look at her, "got no thanks, I hear?"

"I didn't want any!" she answered with a spirt of resentment. Those cold eyes of Lady Ellingham's—she would not have minded so much if they had not been on her all the time. And to what was this tending? Why had she been sent for? To be scolded?

Apparently not, or not that only, for, "Well, you deserved them," he said, his eyes smiling. "You ought to have had your name read in general orders for carrying out instructions. And so I have told Kitty. If anyone was to blame she was. D'you understand, Miss South? You acted like a—like a——"

"Midshipman!" my lady suggested in an enigmatic tone.

"Well, a devilish good one! Yes, about that."

Rachel, blushing with surprise, murmured something incoherent—she was sorry that she had acted in haste—was sorry that he had been hurt.

"Can't play at bowls without rubbers!" he rejoined. "But see here, young lady—where is it, my dear? Give it her."

Lady Ellingham, always with the same air of acting against her will, took a sash from a table and handed it to Rachel.

"But this isn't mine," the girl stammered. "I think there has been—indeed this is much finer stuff."

"Yours? Gad, ma'am, it isn't yours! Yours was spoiled—finished! Finished for good and all. You should have thought of that! Didn't you?"

"Of course I didn't!" she protested, speaking more freely than she had spoken before.

"I believe you!" he retorted. "You wouldn't! But that's yours now. And shake hands, young lady. We've been on the field together and——"

"George," my lady struck in rather tartly, "you've talked enough for this morning. Take your sash, Miss South, and run away now."

"You're a devilish plucky girl!" the Captain said, sinking back in his chair. "But I knew that before."

"Thank you very much," Rachel answered. She was moved almost to tears.

"The boot is on the other foot!"

The girl escaped then and ran lightly up the stairs, smoothing the soft texture of the scarf with her hand. Her republican notions had melted into thin air. Her heart was full, she was overflowing, simple little soul, with gratitude.

Since her last parting with Girardot her thoughts of him were wholly changed. She had seen him as he was, plainly and almost openly seeking her ruin, and she shuddered as she pictured him. But of the lover—of the lover of the former time—she still, and in spite of herself, had long thoughts. She still at times wrestled with the memories of a past happiness. His presence—not as he was, but as she had imagined him—still haunted her pillow, the sweetness of his voice still melted her, his laughing eyes still at moments drew the heart from her, she still with shame thrilled at the remembered touch of his hand.

But the charm and the ache were growing a little and a little less with every day, as other thoughts and other cares dragged at her. And to-day, in particular, if her heart still throbbed and smarted, it was more dully. She thought of him less on this evening than on any evening before, and she slept at night without dreaming of him.

CHAPTER XXIII

AN UNEXPECTED SUMMONS

THE departure of Ould was not felt by the party. No one loved the man, and, though the wit that is spiced with ill-nature has its use in preserving Society from insipidity, someone must smart for the general good. But Captain Dunstan's confinement to a sick-room was felt. His downright opinions and his bluntness provided variety. If he was not witty he provoked wit in others, and his return to the dining-table, which was delayed by a three days' visit that the others paid to a neighbouring house, was an occasion of some festivity. The servants wore their brightest faces, the two ladies an additional jewel or two, wine from his favourite bin was decanted under the chaplain's own eye, and Lord Robert, no longer in awe of Ould's caustic tongue, prepared to enjoy himself.

During dinner the Hunt Ball and the Manydown Assembly, at which the party had been present, were reviewed in all lights. Miss Froyle was quizzed on her conquest of a rustic squire, and the question whether my lord should have worn his Yeomanry uniform or the Hunt coat was redebated. The talk grew more nimble as the wine passed round, the parson's face began to shine, and, when the King's health had been drunk with all the honours, Bobbie saw his chance and gave a toast.

"Bumpers all," he cried, "and a forfeit for the ladies if they pass it. It's a most discreet toast. It commits no one, it probes no secrets, it removes no screen! It is

reticent as Mrs. Fitzherbert, mysterious as Udolpho, and as dark as the Monk."

"But more decent, I hope!" the chaplain muttered.

"As decent as you like! The ladies may drink it without a blush, and my reverend friend without his cheeks becoming a shade more rubicund."

"Well, what is it?" my lord inquired. "To it, Bobbie! Hie in."

"What is it?" Bobbie repeated, raising his glass. "I know no more than you do! I know no more than you do, but I give you The Unknown Cause!"

"The Unknown Cause?" my lady repeated, puzzled.

"To be sure, The Unknown Cause! But as George knows it, he can drink the toast or not, as he chooses. The Unknown Cause, ladies and gentlemen, and no heel-taps!"

Lady Ellingham saw too late what was intended, and she reddened with annoyance. Miss Froyle stiffened—she best knew why—my lord laughed, much tickled, while the Captain grunted, "Oh, confound you. Bobbie!" and Sir Austin mumured "To be sure! To be sure!" and waited for light.

But the ladies' disapproval was pronounced, and it so checked the merriment that the chaplain was thinking how he might best bring off Lord Robert with credit—such little services were a part of his office—when Sir Austin, whose brain always lagged behind, said the very thing that he should not have said.

"By Jove!" he suggested blandly. "Ought we not, with her ladyship's permission, of course"—this with an old-fashioned bow in her direction—"to have the little governess down? On such an occasion, eh?"

My lord choked in his glass. "Why, Froyle, you are a wizard!" he said. "You put one and one together as if you were Cocker himself! Well," and his eyes twinkled with mischief, "you had better ask Kitty."

But my lady frowned. "I think," she said frigidly, "that Miss South has done enough mischief already.

She would be as little in place here as she was on that unfortunate morning."

"She meant well," growled the Captain. But he looked at old Froyle as if he could have strangled him.

However, that brought all of them on him. "Not a doubt of it!" my lord said slyly. "She meant well!"

"Not a doubt in the world!" Bobbie assented, grinning.

"Rixae pars magna fuit," smiled the chaplain.

"Angels rush in where Bobbies stand aloof!" my lord chimed in, his eyes dancing.

"Oh, confound you all!" George retorted, very red in the face. "Confound you, leave the thing alone!" We've had enough of it."

"Quite enough!" said my lady. She looked at Charlotte, who silently but heartily agreed, and the two rose together. The men had to drop their joke and rise also. Bobbie moved to the door to open it, but was anticipated by the unexpected entrance of Bowles. "If you please, my lady," he announced, "Miss South wishes to see you for a minute."

"Talk of the devil!" the chaplain exclaimed, and even Lady Ellingham was startled. She lost her composed air. Coming on the top of what had just passed, the application was untimely. "Why?" she asked coldly. "What is it? Miss South should know that this is not an hour at which I see her."

"I beg your ladyship's pardon," the butler said, "but an express letter has come for her. I understand that her mother is ill, and Miss South wishes to go at once. The chaise that brought the letter was ordered to wait for her that she may catch the night coach at Salisbury."

"Indeed?" my lady said. She spoke in an altered tone. "Indeed! I am sorry. Very well. In my room."

"She went out, following Charlotte Froyle, and the men, with various ejaculations of sympathy, settled down to their wine. "Odd!" said one. "Devilish

odd ! " agreed another. " She'll have a confoundedly cold journey, poor girl ! " said a third, as he set down his glass. " Where does she come from ? "

" Exeter way, somewhere," my lord explained. " Aunt Elisabeth found her." Then feeling that the girl was no longer a fit subject for jesting, he diverted the talk, and within a minute she was to all appearance forgotten. A match between one of the earl's horses and a neighbour's four-year-old was discussed and bets were made.

But an hour or so later the girl's case came to the surface in an unforeseen fashion. The men, pretty sober on the whole, had been some minutes in the drawing-room when Captain Dunstan, who had lingered behind, entered with a hasty step. He approached his sister-in-law. " Did you see the letter ? " he asked, speaking with more than his usual abruptness.

My lady looked up, at a loss for a moment to understand what he meant. " What letter ? " she said. " Oh ! Miss South's, do you mean ? Yes, I saw it."

The letter was, indeed, lying on the table beside her, for the girl in her haste and distress had left it behind, and Lady Ellingham had brought it into the room to show it to Charlotte. Miss Froyle's eyes, as my lady spoke, wandered bleakly to it, and, though she did not speak, the Captain followed her glance, saw the letter, and took it up. He read it without ceremony. " It says the chaise is to wait for her ? " He spoke roughly as if he blamed someone.

" Well, George ? "

" That she may catch the night coach at Salisbury ? For Exeter ? "

" Yes. What of it ? "

" Well, this. There is no night coach from Salisbury for Exeter. It runs only in summer."

" Eh ? " my lord exclaimed, overhearing. " What is that ? "

"There is no night coach from Salisbury to Exeter!" George insisted, striking the letter with his hand. "I've looked in Paterson."

"That's odd," Lady Ellingham said. But having said it she was content to shrug her shoulders. It was silly of George to make such a fuss about the girl! But the men's attention was caught, and they looked inquiringly at him.

"What does it mean?" the Captain demanded. "The letter is written by the doctor. Says her mother has had a cere—cerebral attack, whatever that may be, and that if the girl wishes to see her alive she must return in the chaise and catch—I'll tell you what! This letter is a d—d fraud! I don't believe a word of it! There's no night coach, and you—you ought not to have let the girl go, Kitty!"

The accusation fell sharp among them. He spoke harshly, making no attempt to hide his feelings, and Charlotte reddened with vexation. My lord went out without a word, evidently to consult Paterson for himself. My lady let her work fall into her lap. "Nonsense, George," she said quietly. "You are romancing."

"But there is no night coach!"

"The writer may have made a mistake."

"But everyone has a Paterson!" *Paterson's Road Book* was, be it said, the Bradshaw of that day. "And that's not all. There's the endorsement." He turned the paper over. "'To be forwarded from Salisbury by post-chaise, which will await orders at the Rt. Hon: the Earl of Ellingham's, all expenses paid. Urgent, very urgent.' Why all this arrangement? Did the man suppose that Fred had no horses?"

"But it seems a wise arrangement," my lady contended. "See how quickly Miss South got off."

"To catch a night coach that doesn't run?"

My lord came in. "No, there is no coach," he said.

"It certainly looks fishy. What do you fellows make of it?"

"A mistake," my lady said equably. "George is exciting himself about nothing."

"I'm hanged if I am!" George exploded, his angry eyes challenging opposition. "Post through?" he retorted, in reply to a suggestion. "Ten to one she hasn't the money!"

Lord Robert had an idea and he launched it. "I'll tell you what it is," he said. "If it is as you think, I'll wager there's a man at the bottom of it! Eh? What do you think? Don't you think so?"

The Captain turned on him, but before he could annihilate him, "And perhaps," the chaplain said, "the young lady was not quite in the dark either."

George whirled about, but, "Gad, you think she was fly?" said my lord.

"A put-up thing, I expect!" agreed the chaplain, less discreet than usual. "At any rate," he hedged hurriedly as the Captain's baleful gaze again shifted to him, "it looks like it to me."

George, tormented on all sides, opened his mouth, but before he could find words strong enough, "To be sure, to be sure!" said Sir Austin, catching the idea at last. "I see. The young lady knew what she was going to?"

"You've got it, Sir Austin," said Bobbie, smiling.

George found voice. "Well, I'm d—d!" he cried. "I tell you what it is! You are all as bad one as the other! You're a set of longshore chatterers—worse, begad, than a lot of prating scandal-mongering bum-boatwomen! I've not the patience to listen to you! Can't you see? Haven't you eyes? You've seen the girl. Isn't it a hundred times more likely that some-one—ay, someone of your kidney, confound you!—has laid a false course for her and——"

"And set a trap for her?" broke in my lord.

"Well, I don't know, George. Women are queer things, my lad."

"The women you know are!" George snarled, and, muttering something very unfit for the ladies' ears, he strode out of the room, slamming the white and gold door behind him with a violence that set the pendants on the chandeliers jangling.

Lord Robert grinned, while my lord, struck thus treacherously under the ribs, looked foolish. The other men exchanged glances and shrugged their shoulders. "By Jove!" said Bobbie, lowering his voice, "I'm afraid that George is a case. I'm afraid he is." He shook his head sapiently. "Comes of going to sea."

"'Pon honour," Sir Austin ventured, "it looks to me very much as if—I really begin to think that George ——" and then my lord trod on his toe.

The Countess rose with an impassive face. "It is ten o'clock," she said. "Shall we go, Charlotte?"

"I think it is time," Charlotte assented, in a tone that expressed more than her words. The two rose and retired, and the men, left to themselves, had their say about it, and sniggered a little at George's expense. But a few minutes later, as they crossed the hall on their way to the billiard-room, my lady descended upon them, her feelings for once written on her face.

"Fred!" she exclaimed, addressing him with less of form than she had used with him for a twelvemonth, "George is gone!"

My lord stood. The rest paused to listen. "Gone?" he repeated. "Gone where?"

"Gone after her! And he's not fit."

"The devil he has! How's he gone?"

"He's taken Medea."

"Taken Medea!" my lord exclaimed, and now he was really roused. "Taken Medea, and the ground as hard as iron! If he lames that mare—by gad, but I can't believe he'd do such a mad thing! Confound him! Are you sure, Kitty?"

"They say so. They say that he went straight to the stables, had her saddled and rode off. Bowles ran after him to try to stop him, but was only in time to see him pass the gate."

"Confound the little baggage!" my lord cried, honestly angry for once. "She'll be the laming of that mare, and I've backed her for the Ringwood Cup."

"I wish I could think," said my lady darkly, "that she will do no more harm than that!"

CHAPTER XXIV

MEDEA TO THE RESCUE

IT was true. George had taken Medea, though probably no one else in the house, not even my lord, could have drawn the steeplechaser from her stall for such a purpose. But the Captain's savage eyes had wrought the miracle, though not without trouble, nor until he had fretted away five intolerable minutes, stamping to and fro in the blackness under the great chestnut tree that stood in the middle of the stable-court; the tree that of sunny noons had sheltered generations of stable brats at play—infants chuckling on their backs as they stared up at the sun-flecked foliage or boys stringing cobs—but at night was a Cacus cave sheltering for the same children unknown horrors.

In the end, and reluctantly, Tom had put an end to the Captain's suspense. He had led out the mare, at the same time raising his lanthorn, so as to throw its light on the Captain's face, and assure himself that he was sober. For Tom was quaking in his shoes at the thought of Mr. Coker, the stud-groom, and what that great man would have to say about it in the morning.

"You know she's entered for the cup, Mr. George," he said, as Medea flung up her head and hung back in the doorway, her eyes glistening in the light of the lanthorn.

"D—n the cup!" the Captain said, gathering up the reins and lifting himself to the saddle.

"Well, for God's sake have a care, sir! The ground is hard, and I dunno what Mr. Coker will say!"

Mr. George's answer was lost in the clatter of the mare's hoofs as she sidled over the gravel. Tom walked beside her, throwing the light before her, and would fain have pressed home his warning. But before he had screwed up his courage to say more, the mare broke away into the night, plunging and shying. The light glinted a last time on her sleek quarters, the man heard the Captain steady her to a sharp trot, he lowered his lanthorn. "Grant she come to no harm!" he said. "But I shall catch it sweetly for this! Confound him, as if no other nag would serve his turn!" And most devoutly Tom wished as he went back to the stable that he had not been on duty.

Meanwhile the Captain turned his mount on to the turf and gave her her head. He had a good seat for a sailor, and it was well that he had, for Medea was fresh, the cold air tickled her, and this unwonted frisk among the shadows of the night was a treat of which she was bound to make the most. The lines of trees that flanked the avenue, though she knew perfectly well what they were, gave her noble pretexts for shying, and a dozen times she broke away with a joyous flout of her heels and tore through the cold delicious air with a spirit that tried the Captain's strength to the uttermost. Once a rabbit, scurrying under her nose, really upset her ladyship's nerves, and her rider only saved himself with a hand in her mane. But he steadied her again with voice and rein, rode presently clear of the forest land and cantered across the far-stretching open moor at a steadier pace.

By and by he would have to take to the road, and he knew that it was hard, and he thought of Fred and the cup. But he crushed down the qualm—what mattered a horse, even Medea, beside that which he believed was at stake. He swore savagely under his breath, took a tighter hold of her and pressed her on. His full strength had not come back to him, and he was sweating as if he had ridden a race.

He had reckoned that the chaise had an hour's start of him, and he believed that he could overtake it—if that were all. But that was not all. The thing that most troubled him, that harassed and tormented him, and more than once almost led him to draw rein, was doubt.

What if, after all, he were a fool and the whole thing a mare's nest? The letter might be genuine, the mention of the night coach a mere error, and all that he had raised on them a structure of over-heated fancy —a house of cards! If that were so he had started out on as silly a goose-chase as any man, crazed by his imagination, had undertaken! And he would never hear the end of it.

Or worse still—if those confounded cynics with their poisonous tongues were right? If there was a plot and she was a party to it, the purpose of it that she might escape and join her lover! He knew all about Girardot; my lady had told him, had hastened to tell him. And the doubt would force itself on his mind, though he swore again and again that he knew the girl, and that she was not one to sail under false colours, that her face and her eyes gave the lie to it! He had witnessed her courage in the wood, he had been touched by her dignity when that vixen of an Ann had struck her, he had seen her, instead of swooning, take the sash from her own waist, he had watched her a dozen times, when his eyes and his mind were apparently elsewhere. And he would not believe that she was of that kind. That she could plot and lie for so vile a purpose.

And yet—if she were in love! There was the crux. Always the thought came back to him—what would not a girl do for her lover? And that rascal of a tutor was so wily, so good-looking, so smooth! Was there anywhere a man more likely to twist a girl round his fingers? Even a good girl with eyes like still pools, and lips that trembled at a harsh word?

The Captain groaned, eased the mare up the slight rise by Picket Post and felt the breeze strike more freshly on his brow. He drew rein on the farther slope and listened. Darkness flowed over the depths below him as softly and silently as the limpid stream that, unseen, swayed the long weeds in the bottom of the valley. An owl hooted in Ridley Copse on his right, but its note was so much a part of the night that it did but deepen the stillness. Beyond the valley a long pale line of sky marked the horizon, and some way beneath it a gleam of light betrayed the houses of Ringwood. But no sound of hoofs or skidded wheels rose from the road below him, and with a sigh and at a more cautious pace, with something of indecision in his movements, he began the descent.

A quarter of an hour later he trotted into the sleeping village, saw a stream of light pouring cheerfully from the door of the White Hart, and he pulled up. The sound of a horse at that late hour drew the landlord to the door, and "Has a chaise gone by, Jervis?" the Captain asked, throwing as much indifference into his tone as he could manage.

"Lord, sir," the landlord cried, recognizing him. And he came out to his stirrup. "Is it you, Captain? Who'd ha' thought of seeing your honour as late as this? And you in bed, I thought? A chaise? Ay, to be sure, sir, twenty minutes ago. They stopped to water."

"Who was in it?"

"On'y a young lady, sir. From the Folly, I understood—for Salisbury."

"Oh!" The Captain's voice was flat. "Very good." He turned Medea's head for home. "Forgot something, that's all. Too late now. Thought I might come up with her here. Good night, Jervis."

Jervis called after him, inquiring if he would not take something. But the Captain only waved his hunting-crop in answer. He was already retracing

his steps along the street. He kept the mare at a foot pace for a time, but as soon as he was clear of the houses he gave her her head and trotted smartly on, sitting low in his saddle. A mare's nest ? Yes, it looked like it, since no one had joined her. And how he would be roasted for rushing a hunter through the night, and all for nothing ! The sooner he got the mare home, and safe home, the better.

But when he came, a third of the way up the hill, to the smithy at the cross-roads, he halted. Why had they stayed to water at Ringwood ? Ringwood was hardly seven miles from Queen's Folly, and there could be no need to stop—for man or beast. Was it to leave evidence, if they were followed, that the girl was alone and that all was above-board ? The Captain swore, and sat for a moment undecided. Then impulsively he turned the mare's head into the forest road on his left, struck her smartly with the crop to enforce his will upon her, and sent her along by the by-ways that on that side of the valley skirted the lower slopes of the Forest towards Fordingbridge. They would serve his purpose as well as the main road and be shorter and softer. He had lost twenty minutes of precious time, and had himself to thank for it.

The by-road ran under trees and was dark and rough, but it was soft, and wherever he could safely do so he cantered the mare. He passed through North Poulner, by Moyles Court, lying lonely and dark under its weight of tragedy, and through South Gorley, rousing all the dogs in the hamlet. He forded the Ickley brook, and at North Gorley turned to his left and got upon the main road. There he took to the turf at the side and galloped, riding the harder for the doubts that plagued him and the indecision that weakened him. He was in a fever to settle the question ; and if he had not turned back once and repented of it, he would have whirled about a dozen times, as a dozen times he called

himself every kind of name for starting on such a hare-brained chase.

But to go back now while there remained the slightest uncertainty seemed worse than to persevere. And at length he saw a light ahead of him, in some sick-room perhaps, and quickly he clattered over the long causeway into Fordingbridge, the sliding water glinting darkly below him. He halted before the Greyhound, wedged in on his right between bridge and river.

And here again he was in luck. The house was awake, an ostler came out at once in answer to his hail. Again he inquired if a chaise had passed—a chaise for Salisbury.

The man threw the light of his lanthorn on horse and rider. "Ay, to be sure," he said. "They be gone no more than half an hour."

"They changed horses here?"

"Ay, they did. Anything wrong, mister?" The man's curiosity was raised. He fancied that he knew the gentleman, but he could not put a name to him. The horse, however, was beyond denial: it was such a horse as he had not seen for a twelvemonth.

"One or two travellers?" the Captain asked.

"One or two——?"

"Were there one or two inside?"

"Two, to be sure. A gentleman and a lady." Again, "Anything wrong, mister?"

A long pause. "Did they get out?"

"Narra one."

"You are sure there were two?"

"Well, I see 'em," the man answered dryly. "They looked to be two. And in a mortal hurry to get on. What about 'em, mister?" He raised his lanthorn for a clearer view.

The Captain turned his back and slid stiffly to the ground. "Nothing," he said. "Bring half a bucket of oatmeal and water, luke. And be sharp about it."

The sight of half a crown quickened the man's

movements, and he was back in two minutes with the bucket. "That's a gay fine mare," he said, as he held the pail on his knee while Medea blew delicately on it, in doubt of its cleanliness. "You've ridden her too!"

The Captain tightened a girth. "Ay," he said, his head under the saddle-flap. "The lady left no message here?"

"Narra a word! Kep' out of sight, if you ask me."

"I meant to meet them here," the Captain explained, as he turned to watch Medea quenching her thirst in her dainty fashion. "And I'm too late."

"Well, you've made haste too."

The Captain did not answer. He swung himself up, handed over the coin, and turned for home. "Good night."

He paced slowly away into the darkness, and passed again over the long causeway where the wind from the marshes nipped him and chilled his blood.

But the chill without was nothing to the chill within; the rushy flat through which the water flowed and whispered beneath him was not half so cold and dead as the spirit within him. So, after all, the candid eyes and the soft tremulous lips had been lies, the woman's common wiles that took in foolish men! And she had—she had been that kind of girl! Her looks that had seemed so open, her artless manners, her gentle dignity, all had been but so many false lights set up to lead men on to shoals and rocks and shipwreck. And when she had been most open, then she had been most cunning, laughing in secret, marking with shrewd derisive eyes the stupid seaman as he tacked to and fro masking his clumsy course.

She had affected solitude and forced a tear to her eye the while she plotted how she might most quickly join her lover! She was that kind of girl.

And with it all, with all her address, a fool! The rider's chin sank lower on his breast. For he might

not know women—here indeed was the proof, the damning proof that he did not. Kitty, even Kitty might deceive, might be every day deceiving him. But he did know men, and Girardot with his handsome face, his laughing eyes, his glib tongue, was an open book to him. Quickly, quickly would he tire of his easy conquest, and then what would be her fate? Something between a groan and a curse escaped from the Captain's lips and he struck Medea—Medea who had never offended him.

CHAPTER XXV

TWO IN A POST-CHAISE

RACHEL sank dry-eyed into the corner of the chaise. The lofty lighted doorway of Queen's Folly and the figures about it vanished, the rattle of the wheels over the forecourt changed to a dull rumble, the shadowy lines of trees flitted past. But the girl's one, her only thought was that she was on her way at last—though indeed little time had been lost—that the grim race with death had begun.

She counted the hours that lay before her; she measured the suspense. And the immediate past, with its doubts and fears, its passion and fever, fell away from her like a cloak put off. The persons among whom her life had lately moved, whose esteem or dislike, praise or blame had been all in all—ay, and among them even he who had caught her heart, toyed with it, and wrung it—faded into dimness, became shadows without import, mattering nothing. Only one thing mattered. The tender, lined face that had looked its last on her from the wooden porch of that humble cottage by the sea, the veined hands roughened in her service, the mother voice—these were all that concerned her now, were all her world. And she was going to lose them. Oh, that she had never left them! That she had known how to value them, how to cherish them, and with every day and hour to lay by some dear remembrance of the love that could never be replaced! Oh, the time that she had wasted!

Tearless, staring into the darkness, she clasped

hand in hand, drawing at intervals deep and painful sighs, as memory, ruthless and cruel, stabbed her, recalled impatient words, ungracious looks, a selfish act, the wilful choice of her own pleasure. Little things, lightly weighed and as quickly done with. But the sting of them rankled now, now when there might be no place for repentance, no room to make amends, no impassioned words whereby to prove her love, her boundless gratitude! Now, when the heart, so tender and so forgiving, might already be cold, and the work-worn hand lie nerveless!

She could only pray, voiceless and wordless, pray that she might be in time! She could only send her heart—and indeed it seemed as if she could send her heart!—before her.

She was not as yet impatient. The hour for impatience was not yet come. The end of the journey lay so far away. When it approached, then indeed she did not know how she would bear the waiting, or live through the last hour of suspense. At present she had but to endure.

A little white-faced girl, lost in the darkness of the chaise that itself, with its feeble lights, was but a moving atom in the vast of night. Yet within her a world of emotion, of thought, of purpose, ceaselessly revolving.

Presently she felt the carriage stop, saw lights and figures through the dim glass, perceived that they were watering the horses. Again the chaise jolted on, the lights slid back, once more the horses were pounding along the dark road. On her right a gloomy line of woods rose to a sky but a shade lighter; and, had she been in her everyday mood, her lonely position must have presented visions of peril to her mind. She would have seen in every clump of trees a highwayman, and trembled where the night was deepest. But she had passed beyond those fears.

And this was fortunate, for ten minutes later, as

she sat patient in her corner, the unexpected happened. She heard a cry—twice repeated. The carriage came slowly, and, it seemed, unwillingly to a stand. She caught a word or two. Then the door beside her was plucked open, a dark form for an instant filled the gap, sprang in. The door closed, the chaise bounded forwards, and, trembling with indignation, she uttered a cry of protest, and shrank into her corner. Her first thought was that the postboy had taken up a fare—as they did at times where they dared to take a liberty. But at night, and when she was alone!

Before she could speak, "Do not be alarmed," said a voice that went through her like a sword-thrust—alas, a too well-known voice. "I can explain, indeed I can explain. I heard at Salisbury——"

She was dumb with amazement—with amazement so great that for a time it left room for no other feeling.

"I heard at Salisbury," he stammered, making no effort to combat the nervousness that moved him. "I was at the White Hart, and I heard that a chaise was starting for you—that it was to bring you back. I pictured you alone, in sorrow, grieving, and I could not bear—you may think it impertinent, uncalled for, wrong, if you will! But I could not bear that you should travel so—alone! I came to meet you—only, believe me, to see you safe to the coach! Only to be sure that you were not frightened, not molested, were not——"

She had only one thought, to remain mistress of herself; and, thank God, that was easy. "It was unnecessary," she said, her voice cold as ice. "Quite unnecessary, Mr. Girardot."

"But it was natural! Say that it was natural?" he urged. "I could not help it. You must see that it was natural—and forgive me."

She was trembling with indignation, but with no other feeling. That—all that was dead in her! She

had not been sure of it until now—now when she heard his voice, and the only emotion that it awoke in her was anger at his untimely, his cruel intrusion. "You might have met me at Salisbury," she said.

"And been"—he threw all the anxiety he could into his deep voice—"been hours in an agony lest something should happen to you!"

"That is nonsense!" she replied in the coldest of tones. "Nothing was likely to happen to me."

"I could not know that. How could I know that? And I could not bear the suspense, or the thought that you were in trouble and that, though I might never see you again, I might be of use to you! Might leave some kindlier remembrance behind me—go from you with at least one word of forgiveness! It was that—and surely, surely it was natural that I should come if I had not a heart of stone!"

His voice shook with the force of his pleading. But Rachel was beyond the power of that voice. She only grew harder and colder with every word that he said, with every moment that passed. She felt—and it was a proof of her inexperience—no fear. She did not suspect that he had another motive for intruding on her than that which he declared, or a purpose beyond that which he avowed. But she felt that his presence was an outrage, and that the manner in which they had parted should alone have forbidden the step that he had taken. He had not thought of her, nor of the harm that his company might do her, but only of his own gratification. And her voice was freezing when she spoke. "It was wrong," she said. "I can protect myself, Mr. Girardot. I ask you to leave me."

"What?" he replied. "You would have me get out here? In the road, in the night?"

She longed passionately to be free from him, but, "Then at the next stage," she said with firmness. "You should not be here. You should not have come."

"I meant well," he protested.

But she was not moved. She did not answer. And he had at least, he reflected, made good his footing; he must not frighten her. He held himself as far from her as he could, and he was careful not to touch her. He had anticipated more alarm, more suspicion—and also more agitation. He had feared that she would discern the weak place in his tale and inquire how he came to know that she was in trouble, since the outside of the letter, even if he had seen it, could not inform him of that. But Rachel, engrossed in her grief, had forgotten that it was not known to all the world.

Now if he could keep his seat beyond Fordingbridge, if he could lull her suspicions just a little longer—but he would not, he dared not anticipate or give his imagination rein. With his pulses beating furiously, with intoxicating pictures dancing before his eyes, he must still restrain himself, for to anticipate, to snatch at the fruit before it was ripe, would be fatal. She was so near that he could almost feel her breath upon his cheek! He had only to stretch out his hand to touch her, to take her, to cover her with kisses! But the time for that was not yet: he must crush down the temptation. He must think only of Fordingbridge. Once past that . . .

It came, and came so quickly that he had little time for thought. A light or two glimmered before them, they were on the long bridge, they were passing over it with the sullen water lapping the piles below them and the river mists deepening the night. They stopped abruptly before the lighted doorway of the Greyhound, and the crisis was on him. If fraud failed he must fall back on force—were it possible.

"Surely you will let me come on to Salisbury?" he urged. "If you wish it I will leave you short of the city. But I cannot bear to leave you alone, here."

"No!" Rachel cried passionately. "Leave me, sir, I beg. I insist on it."

"But why?"

"Mr. Girardot!" Her voice trembled with anger. "If you are a gentleman, you will leave me when I ask you. It is not fitting, it is not right, sir, that you should thrust yourself upon me."

"She fears herself," he thought, and he hugged himself. Aloud, "But indeed, indeed," he pleaded, deprecating her anger even while he persisted, "it will do you no harm if I get out short of the city. Of course," he continued, as she seized the handle of the door, and tried to turn it, "if you appeal to the stablemen, they will put me out. But I am thinking of you, not of myself; is it worth while to have a scandal, when I have come so far to be of service, and my only desire is to see you in safety? What do you fear?"

"Nothing!"

"Then why," he retorted with a flash of humour—the handle was stiff and she had failed to turn it—"do anything so desperate? Why force me to walk ten miles?"

She hesitated, and, to gain time, he rose. "Well," he said reluctantly, "if you will have it so! But it is an ill return—an ill return for my—my anxiety." He pretended to feel in the darkness for the handle, and, while she waited for him to open the door and descend, the chaise moved abruptly, swung onwards from the inn door, the lights passed behind them, they were off again.

"Oh!" she cried in helpless resentment, "you should have got out! You should have got out! It is base, sir—base of you to force yourself on me!" Her voice trembled with indignation, for she felt that he had outwitted her.

"Base?" he repeated softly. "Base? Oh, if you knew, Rachel!"

But his words were lost in the rumble of the wheels and she did not catch them. And after all, it mattered

little, very little ! She was ashamed to think that her mind should have been diverted even for a second from the object of her journey—that she should have forgotten even for a moment her mother ! Her thoughts reverted to the cottage, to what might be passing there ! And, alas ! what might not be passing there while she bandied words about trifles that mattered not ? What sacred moments, what trials of fortitude, what scenes of distress ? She thought of Ruth, called, child as she was and alone, to meet such awful issues, to catch her mother's last words, to receive the last pressure of the loved hand. Ah, with what passion, in what a sad embrace would they two meet, would they melt in one another's arms !

For a space—for how long Rachel never knew—she lost herself in such musings. She forgot the present, she forgot even her companion—or, if a thought of him intruded, she reproached herself. She was standing in the dear room with the latticed panes and the sloping floor and the faded dimity hangings—standing by a dying bed.

Oh, why had she gone from her ? Why had she left her mother and wasted those months that might have been spent by her side, spent in fond attendance on her, in loving care of her, in making atonement for past heedlessness ?

She was brought back and sharply to the present. A horse stumbled and, recovering itself with a scramble, jolted her in her seat. She peered out. Trees, their trunks sliding by in the lamplight, overhung the road, their branches swept the sides of the chaise. They were passing through a wood, ascending too, climbing steeply on a narrow road, a rougher road than she remembered. She tried, looking out of each window by turns, to probe the gloom, and her heart that had been so low beat a sudden alarm. Doubts assailed her, and for the first time apprehension. She tried to recall the road beyond Fordingbridge—surely there

should be low meadows on her right, water-meadows stretching far on either side of the river. And no wood! "Where are we?" she exclaimed, her words a challenge.

Her quiescence had puzzled him, but it had been in his favour, and he had been glad to let her be. Now that the question that he knew must come sooner or later was put, he was prepared for it. "There is nothing to alarm you," he said, "and much to relieve you. If you will listen to me—if you will listen to me for a moment, I have good news. I have the best of news, dear Rachel—for dear you are to me, though you forbid the word. News that will relieve that tender heart and dry those tears, that will——"

"Why are we off the road?" she cried. She was frightened now—frightened at last. There was that in his honeyed tone that admitted deceit, that betrayed an abyss, that fell into line with the dark woods, the narrow road, the labouring horses.

"I am going to tell you," he said in the same deprecating tone. "Only—do not be angry, do not be angry with me. What I have done, what I have to confess, I have done out of love, overmastering love that I could not—that no man could have resisted! And have no fear. You are as safe with me, day or night, here or elsewhere, as——"

"No," she cried, clapping her hands. "Why are we off the road? That is the question. Answer it, sir! Answer it! I am going to my mother, and she is dying! Do you understand? There is not a minute to lose in folly, sir, if I would see her alive!" Her voice was hard as iron.

"You will see her alive!" he said. "You will, you will, and many times, I trust. But say, say first," he repeated with passion, as he brought all his powers into play to move her, "say that you forgive me! That you forgive me for the trick that I have played you in the madness of my love! If I have

deceived you—if I have for a moment wrung that tender breast——"

"Mr. Girardot!" she spoke in a voice that he did not know. "If you do not tell me the truth at once I will break the window and appeal to the postboy! This is odious! This is intolerable!"

"He would not heed you," he replied coolly—for all must come out now, and the more quickly the better. "And it were a pity to wound that little hand. But, dear spitfire, hear me, and, as I love, forgive. Your mother is not ill. She has not been ill." Rachel uttered a half-stifled cry. "She is as well as you are. I have deceived you—yes, I have deceived you. But if I have caused you pain, short-lived pain, think with pity—oh, Rachel, think," he repeated with fire, "of one whose pain is lasting, who suffers and sees no cure but at your will, and who found no means of pleading with you save this! Surely, my dear, some mercy, some softness there must be in that woman's breast!"

But Rachel had ceased to listen. She had broken into a passion of weeping, deaf to his excuses, heedless of his presence. For the moment, in the immensity of her relief, one thing only appealed to her, one thing only was of import. Her mother lived! Her mother lived, and she would see her, would clasp the loved hand, hear again the accents of that voice. In the revulsion of her feelings and her thankfulness she lost sight of her previous fear, forgot her position, recked nothing of his presence. And even when, as she grew calmer, she fell to earth again and awoke to his voice and the desperate pleading he continued to pour into her ears—when with a shock she recognized his treachery, it was a hard pitiless anger rather than alarm that at first possessed her.

But he did not know that; and he had triumphed too often to despair. He had welcomed her tears, not understanding their cause, for they bridged over the awkward moment, they won him time. And the more

deeply she was moved, the more he hoped. In the troubled waters he looked to fish with success—the woman moved was the woman half won. So, receiving no answer, no repudiation of his suit, he was deceived into thinking that she wavered. And he was careful not to touch her, not to alarm her, though the temptation to draw her to him, to crush the slender form in his arms, to seek her lips, was almost more than he could withstand. But he did resist it: that and all would follow if he were patient. She sobbed, and he supposed that she listened. So had women sobbed and listened, and, sobbing and listening, had yielded. Presently she would find her voice, plead, protest, deny; and then he would know how, by gentle force, to win consent. Or, if she still would not yield, he would point out her position, the night, his presence and what the world would say of it. He would prove to her that the Rubicon was passed already, her good name gone, all lost—save love!

He had gone through it before, proved it, tried it. Yet would he omit no precaution that experience suggested. And after all, she was at his mercy.

They had passed out of the wood before she grew calm; they were crossing a wild common, set sparsely with undergrowth that fringed the road. And still she did not speak—but she might be wavering. He could not distinguish her face, so dark was it, but he could picture it, and, as his confidence grew, so did the lure of her form—so near that he had but to put out his hand and she was his. It was a shock when at last she spoke, and her voice rang sharp and shrewish.

"Stop, sir, and let me out! At once! At once!" she cried.

Her firmness took him aback. It was not what he had expected. But, "My dearest, dearest Rachel," he protested, "it is impossible! Even were you so hard, so heartless, if you had so little feeling or pity for me——"

"If you do not let me out," she said wildly, "I will throw myself out!" And she struck the glass of the window. "Do you hear, sir? If you are not utterly vile, you will suffer me to get out, or you will leave me!"

"Alone?" His tone was almost mocking now. "In this waste to perish of cold? Never! Listen, dear heart, listen! You are safe with me——"

"I do not think so!" she retorted. "And you—do you not yet understand, sir, that I loathe you—loathe you were it for nothing else but the cruel, the heartless trick that you have played me! Let me out! Let me out, sir! Or I will throw myself out!"

He heard her fumbling for the handle, and, though he did not believe that she would carry out her threat while the carriage was moving at speed, the excuse served him. "So you are stubborn, are you!" he replied, his anger roused. "Softly, softly! We are not at an end yet!" And he found and seized her hand and drew her forcibly towards him. She uttered a cry, and with her free hand she struck the glass furiously, shattering it.

"Stop! Stop!" she screamed. "Help!"

"Dear, dear little fool!" he said, and easily mastering her—for what could she do in that space?—he drew her to him. She struggled, and then, panting, desisted. "Frightened little heart," he murmured. "Heart of my heart, what are you afraid of? See, I do not harm you. I do not hurt you. I do but prevent you harming yourself. Those little hands were never meant for that, but to be cherished, fondled, kissed, adored!"

She gasped, helpless, despairing. But even in that desperate strait she kept her wits, and his words suggested something. "Oh, the blood! My wrist!" she cried suddenly. "My wrist! Give me a handkerchief!" Terror rang in her voice. "For pity's sake a handkerchief! I shall bleed to death!"

Alarmed, he released her for a moment and felt for his handkerchief. "Now that comes," he said reproachfully, "of obstinacy. I told you that those little hands were never meant——"

But, "Oh, a light!" she sobbed hysterically. "A light! It is bleeding—bleeding over me! I shall die."

He folded the handkerchief, and the moment he gave to that task, which required the use of both hands, was fatal. In the darkness she had found the handle and this time she succeeded in turning it. As he leaned towards her with the handkerchief, she hurled herself bodily against the door. It gave way, and she flung herself recklessly from the carriage, the grasp that he made at her skirt missing her by inches.

He swore and shouted. "Stop! Stop!" he cried.

CHAPTER XXVI

THE FLIGHT IN THE NIGHT

RACHEL fell with stunning violence, and had she struck the road she might have paid for her resolution with her life. Fortunately she fell on the turf beside the way, and even before the carriage came to a halt she had staggered to her feet. Shaken and breathless as she was, the will to escape was still uppermost, and there was in that small frame wit as well as courage. The road was open, without fence on either side, but she had the quickness to foresee that she would be first sought on the side towards which she had fallen; and before Girardot set foot on the road she had staggered across it and crept through the shallow ditch on the other side. While the tutor, appalled by the catastrophe, was still unshipping with shaking fingers one of the lamps, she pushed her way through the brambles, and by the time he reached the spot, and began to throw his light—which blinded him to all but the ground on which it shone—about him, she had sunk down behind a bush and lay still as a hare in her form. But the bushes that hid her were no more than three or four paces from the road, and never did poor Puss's heart beat more wildly than the girl's.

Girardot fully expected to find her lying dead or injured in the way, and when he failed to do so, his first feeling was one of pure relief. But to that, anger at her obstinacy, anger and a baser feeling quickly succeeded, and once assured that she had escaped with

uninjured limbs, the tutor ran back along the road, flashing his light before him and calling on her to stop. He wasted half a minute in this, while she cautiously edged herself a little farther into the covert. Then, persuaded that she had not gone that way, he returned as speedily as he could, and did what she had foreseen that he would do. He crossed the ditch on the side on which she had fallen, and pushed his way amid the undergrowth, still calling her name and throwing his light hither and thither.

She had waited, trembling the while, for this, and the moment that her ears told her that he was breaking his way through the bushes, she rose, and under cover of the noise groped her way farther into the thicket. It was a wild edge of common, a wilderness of brambles, thick in one place, thin in another, and set sparsely with thorn-trees. She tore her gown and her hands and scratched her face, but in her excitement she felt no pain, and as long as she dared and she could hear her pursuer moving she crept stealthily on. Then when she heard him leap back into the road, she sank down again. She heard his voice rise, answering the questions of the postboy. And now she guessed that he was beating the ditch on the side next to her.

But she was by this time at some distance, twenty or thirty yards from the road, and she was wiser than to move. She trembled indeed, when she saw his light flashing over her head and knew that he had at last entered the brake and was beating the edge of it this way and that. But she only held her breath and crouched the lower. The wind of the night soughed over her, the unknown fathomless night that ordinarily held so many terrors for her. But now her only terror was of him.

And oh, the relief when she saw his light retreating and again heard his feet sound on the hard road. A second conference followed, but now the voices were

less distinct. Apparently the conclusion at which he and the postboy arrived was that the fugitive had been quicker on her feet than they had calculated—that she had, after all, fled back by the way they had come. At any rate, the carriage was turned, not without delay and some cracking of the whip. A moment later she saw with tremulous thankfulness the lights travelling back towards Fordingbridge.

Five minutes she waited until the last sound of the horses' feet had died away, and then she scrambled back into the road. She was free, but now that the crisis was over she sobbed with excitement and could hardly stand. Her left hand, strained in the fall, was nearly useless, she had lost a shoe, her knees trembled, her heart seemed to be bursting. And she was alone on an unknown road, in a strange country, in winter.

Many a one, as unused to hardships as she was, would have lost hope and sunk down in a swoon that at that season might end in death. But Rachel was of firmer will. Mother, sister, home rose before her, and though her head ached and she was very sick, she limped painfully away along the road. Some house, some help she must find if she persevered; and though more than once sheer giddiness brought her to a stand, always she went on again. The stones of the road bruised her unshod foot, a cow that bounced up before her drew from her a gasp of terror; but she held on. The cottage fireside shining in the night beckoned her, and more than once, and half unconsciously, she called on her mother.

And by and by hope cheered her. High up on her left she espied in the universal gloom a single light, and she pressed on desperately towards it. A light! If it was not a star it must mean a house, it must mean help. But the road, which at this point was hedged on either side, did not always lead towards it; at times she lost sight of the light, and the ascent that rose to it taxed her last reserve of strength. But at last she

drew abreast of it; she saw dimly a gap in the hedge, and conjectured a gate, found it and leant upon it. She made out a low building, from a window in which the blessed ray seemed to beam, and she staggered across a sloping farmyard, groped for and found a door. Too weak to call out and sinking with fatigue, she beat on the door with her uninjured hand.

She leant her head against the rough wood. If they would not come? If they would not let her in? She knew that she had not the strength to go farther. She tried to cry out, but no sound issued from her parched throat. If they did not come she must fall where she was. Again and desperately she struck the door.

Then, joy! She heard a heavy step descending naked stairs, saw a gleam of light under the door, heard the slow trapesing of slippered feet across a stone floor. A voice asked gruffly who was there. She forced herself to utter some faint sound, the door was opened, slowly and suspiciously, and blinded by the sudden light the girl tottered across the threshold.

"Lord ha' mercy!" cried the stout woman, half dressed, who confronted her. She held up the light that she carried, and with amazement, and it must be owned with suspicion, she surveyed the stranger. "Who be you, wench?"

The girl could only point to her throat and whisper a hoarse word. But her white, drawn face, her torn, disordered dress, and the blood that disfigured her, all spoke for her. "God ha' mercy!" the woman repeated. "What has happened to you?"

Without waiting for an answer, and though her surprise had still in it something of misgiving, she thrust forward a chair, and Rachel sank into it. After another searching look the woman bustled away and returned bearing a mug of milk. Again she looked her visitor over, withheld the milk, and hurried up the boxed-in stairs. A moment and she was down again, attended by a faint smell of brandy. "There, sip up that," she

said, and, setting her arms akimbo, stood staring at the girl. After a pause, "Ha, someone set on you?" she asked.

Rachel had drunk and gasped, and a little colour returned to her cheeks. She heaved a deep sigh, but instead of answering the question she looked at the door. "Can you lock it?" she whispered. "Oh, please, please lock it!"

The woman shrugged her shoulders, but complied. She had fancied at first that the girl was a gipsy, and at farmhouses gipsies are no welcome visitors. But by this time her eyes had assured her that, torn and stained as the girl's clothes were, they were no country wench's. She marked the unshod and muddied foot, the scratched and bloodstained face, and pity got the better of suspicion. "Lord's sake," she repeated, "someone has mishandled you, child! And someone should pay for it. Seems a constable's job. D'you come in here, and I'll stir up the embers. You're all of a shake wi' cold."

Beckoned to follow, Rachel limped after her into an inner kitchen where a half-extinguished fire smouldered on the hearth. The woman placed her on a settle while she stirred the wood to a blaze and lowered a kettle that hung above it. "I saw the light," Rachel whispered thankfully.

"Then 'twas lucky my old man was sick. But you"—the woman stared at her—"you be no Whitsbury girl. Who be you, if I may ask? It is late for a young lass like you to be tramping the roads."

"Someone—I wanted to get away from someone," Rachel faltered. "I jumped out of a carriage. You are sure, you are quite sure, you won't let anyone in?"

"No fear! The door's locked, and 'twon't be opened again, noways. But there's my old man a-thumping. He'll be in a fine stew to think what it's about. Do you take another sip, my dear. There's naught in it to

harm you, only a spoonful of what John Tredescant, the goodman's cousin that lives seaward, sent us Christmas-time. Do you take off your stockings, miss," she continued, with another shrewd glance at her clothes, "and I'll bring you water to fettle yourself when I've fettled my man. I'll make you a bed on the settle, maybe."

She disappeared, and lulled by the warm air of the kitchen, soothed by the homely aspect of the pots and pans gleaming in the firelight, of the racks of flitches hung overhead among bunches of herbs, Rachel leant her head against the wooden back of the settle and closed her eyes. But only her body rested, her nerves were still ajar, her brain worked. In thought she lived again the horrid hour, the trying scene through which she had passed; or if her mind for a moment wrenched itself from it, it was only to busy itself with the position in which Girardot's cruel trick had placed her—with what would be said and what would be thought. The Countess had been kind at parting, but beneath her kindness the girl felt a subtle, a latent antagonism; and in what other quarter could she look for support?

True, if her story were believed—but if it were not? She had not the strength to fight a battle, or face the suspicion that she foresaw. Only in one quarter, only in one house could she be sure of understanding, and passionately she longed for her home.

She was crying softly when the good wife returned and with rough motherliness bathed the sprained wrist and bound it up. She helped the girl to restore some order to her clothing, and to Rachel's inquiry, "Why, you be at Whitsbury," she said. "From Fordingbridge? Why, all of four miles for sure. And where be you from, miss? From Queen's Folly? Well, I never!" she ejaculated in a tone of surprise. "Why, my husband's brother, Jacob Mew, he've a farm under my lord. But good gracious, my lady, who'd ha'

thought of you running the roads at this time o' night ? "

" Oh, but," Rachel explained eagerly, " I'm not my lady. I'm only the governess, Mrs. Mew. And——"

She broke off and clutched the woman's arm. Someone had knocked at the house-door ! As Rachel had knocked half an hour before, someone was knocking now, but more loudly and more vigorously, with a heavy hand. Rachel stared at the inner door, still holding Mrs. Mew's arm. " Oh, don't, don't let them in ! " she whispered. " Promise me you won't."

Mrs. Mew looked her uneasiness. " 'Twasn't my old man ? " she suggested doubtfully.

" No ! No ! " Rachel muttered. " It was there ! At the door ! If we are still, if we don't answer, he may go away."

" Drat him, I hope he will ! "

" But you won't let him in ? " the girl insisted, her scared eyes roving the room in search of a hiding-place. " Promise me."

The woman nodded, and the two held their breath. But the knocking was repeated, and the sick man, hearing it, thumped the floor and made further silence futile. " I must fend him off some ways," Mrs. Mew said, " or my old man will have a fit. But don't you fear, miss, I'll speak to him from the window—he don't come in here ! " And in spite of Rachel's efforts, who would still have detained her, she went into the outer room and closed the door behind her.

Notwithstanding the woman's promise, the girl trembled. The man had shown himself so reckless, so desperate ,so lost to all goodness, that she held him capable of anything. He might drag her out by force, and what could the woman do to prevent him ? Or he might tell some story—say that she was mad, perhaps. Terror conquered her, and after listening awhile she crept across the floor to the door that closed the

narrow boxed-in stairs, and holding it ajar she prepared to slip upstairs.

She could hear the woman's voice, and the length of the parley added to her panic. Nor without cause, for presently she heard the key grate in the lock and heard a heavy step, a man's step, enter. The woman had betrayed her!

Sick with fright, she crept up a couple of stairs and drew the door close behind her. In the darkness her heart beat as if it would suffocate her. Her senses seemed to be sharpened; she could hear, though the door was closed, the solemn tick of the tall clock and the chirp of a cricket on the hearth. Then the heavy step drew nearer, entered, crossed the floor of the room she had left. She heard the faithless woman cry, "Well, to be sure, and what's become——" and then as, too late, she turned to escape up the stairs, the door that masked her was plucked open and a hand grasped her skirt.

"Softly, softly, ma'am!" said a well-known voice—but not, thank God! the one she had feared to hear. "Let's have a look at you! I've crowded tops'les and royals to come up with you, and now I'm here—hallo!" The speaker's voice rose, suddenly and ludicrously charged with alarm, "I'm d——d if she's not fainting! Here, missus, here. Help! This is your business!"

But, "No! No!" Rachel gasped in the immensity of her relief, and she stepped down. "I'm not going to faint, indeed, indeed I'm not. I shall be well—in a minute."

It was Captain Dunstan. He supported her to the settle, but Mrs. Mew, who was still a little in the dark, judged by the sternness of his face that the young lady would catch it by and by. But the Captain's face was in shadow, and Mrs. Mew may have misread it. Still his next words confirmed her impression.

"In another scrape?" he said, standing over poor Rachel, his hands, one of them holding a whip, in his pockets. "D'you know, young lady, you are more trouble than the worst pickle of a youngster I ever sent to the cabin gun! There's seventeen miles—and about-ship twice—that I've followed you, and if I've not lamed Medea I'm precious lucky. Damme, what have you to say for yourself, eh?"

Rachel looked up through her tears. "I am very, very grateful to you," she murmured—and her eyes said more than her words. She felt safe at last—safe now. She knew, heaven knows why, that she could trust this man.

"And, by gad," he continued, surveying her, "you've been in the wars and no mistake!"

"I never see a young lady so mauled!" said Mrs. Mew. "It's a wonder she did not lie down in the road and die. I took her for a gipsy when she come in. She was like nothing else!"

"A gipsy? Too much of a gipsy! For ever in one trouble or another!" Yet his voice was more gentle than his words. "But now, enough of yarning, young lady. There'll be time enough for that by and by. D'you understand, ma'am, that we are not out of the wood yet, and we've got to act now if we act at all." He looked at the tall clock. "I've thrown my coat over the mare, but if she's not to catch cold and make matters worse we must be moving. D'you think you can travel?"

"Travel?" Mrs. Mew exclaimed, and decided that, Dunstan or no Dunstan—and she had been brought up to revere the name—the Captain was hard as a stone. "Why, in her state," and indeed Rachel's drawn face and weary eyes told the same tale, "she is no more fit to travel than I am to read print!"

"She's got to travel if she can," the Captain replied doggedly. "She's got to sleep at the Folly early or late, and there's no more to it!"

"Then it will be dead," said Mrs. Mew, bristling up in her indignation.

"Alive or dead!" said the Captain.

"Well I never!"

But he turned to Rachel as if Mrs. Mew had not spoken. "Now, young woman, we shall see if you are made of sugar-stick or no," he said. "I suppose you understand? I suppose you understand why it's necessary if the missus don't? Can you go?"

Rachel flushed faintly. "I have only one shoe," she said.

"Only one shoe? Good God!" For a moment he seemed to be upset. "Good Lord!" he repeated, an odd note in his voice. The next moment, however, he recovered himself. "Shoes be hanged!" he said. "One shoe or no shoe, ma'am, will you go? Full-rigged or jury—will you try?"

Rachel's eyes met his. "I will try," she said meekly.

"Good!" He was evidently pleased. "Black Dick, who only smiles when the bulkheads are knocked out, could say no more, ma'am, nor Mad Dick better. Come, we'll round the point yet! I'll double the stirrup over the saddle and you'll ride the mare to Fordingbridge—she's as quiet as a lamb now. And I'll get horses at the Greyhound, if I have to burn the house down! There, missus, you get her ready, while I rig the saddle."

But Mrs. Mew could not contain herself. "It's my belief the young lady will die," she said. "I say it, and I should know. I declare I think you are a very cruel man!"

"Oh, she'll not die!" the Captain said carelessly, and he turned to the door. "She's not of the dying sort!"

"Her foot's cut to ribands!"

He hung a moment at the door. He seemed to

hesitate. Then, "Well, plait 'em up!" he said heartlessly, and tramped out.

"I declare," Mrs. Mew said viciously, "the one man's as big a brute as the other!" Which was an enormous thing for her to say of a Dunstan. "Are you going to trust yourself with him, my dear?"

"Yes," Rachel said.

CHAPTER XXVII

THE RETURN

BUT more than once during the endless dark hour that followed she repented. Of course they made but slow progress, Rachel perched, trembling and as helpless as a sack, on her uneasy saddle, the Captaïn trudging beside her and leading the mare. Now and then he threw her a curt word of encouragement, but for the most part he plodded on in silence, or at rare intervals broke into a line of doggerel and as abruptly broke off again. The girl, shaken with every step, could have wept with pure fatigue. The saddle galled her, her wrist burned, she ached in every limb, she knew that a start or a stumble would unseat her ; and though he had forced his riding-cloak upon her, she was chilled to the bone.

She could have wept and would have found it a relief to weep. But she did not, for the man who walked beside her, and, if his drooping head and slouching step went for anything, was as weary as she was, had taken possession of her. He had set up a standard and she felt herself bound to act up to it. He had not spared himself, and he had made it clear that he expected her not to spare herself. He had forced her to understand that there were times when to suffer in body was the least costly way of escape.

So she ached and shivered, and a score of times thought that she would fall, but she endured in silence, because the man would have it so. For her heart was full to bursting with gratitude to him. As she looked

down on his bent head as he toiled beside her, as she measured what he had done and what she owed to him, she was infinitely moved. She was nothing to him, her peril or her safety alike indifferent, her fate a trifle. Yet on the mere suspicion that she was in danger he had stooped from his place, he had thought of her and for her ; for her, the dependant who was no care or charge of his. He had faced, barely risen from a sick-bed, the perils of the road, perils that loomed large in her eyes, and had ridden the interminable miles that they were now retracing—to save her ! He had done this to save her and her good name. For she did not forget that ; on the contrary, she thought much of it, not knowing for which to be more grateful, the delicacy with which he had laid his finger on the difficulty, or the firmness with which he had forced her to meet it.

And it had been nothing to him. What did it matter to the Honourable George Dunstan if his brother's governess, poor silly child, was ruined by a villain's deceit and her own folly ? Nothing, less than nothing. She longed with a full heart to thank him, longed for fitting words, yet knew that she would never dare to thank him.

At long last a dog barked in the night, buildings loomed up on either hand, they plodded wearily into the main road at Fordingbridge. But the village slept, not a light shone in cottage or house, and it was not until the Captain had shouted again and again, hammered the door and thrown gravel at the windows, that the inn by the river awoke. At last a lattice opened, a sulky voice asked what the devil was the matter. What did they want at that time of night ?

" Horses ! " the Captain answered stormily. " A chaise to Queen's Folly, man ! And hurry, hurry ! Double mileage if you are quick ! "

The authority that rang in his voice, his mastery, his persistence, seemed god-like to Rachel, cowering and shaking at his side—he had lifted her down without

ceremony. Jove-like, too, was the effect of his name. Lights flickered everywhere, and within a minute or two she was inside, warmed at a fire, obsequiously tended by a dishevelled hostess. "An accident!" the Captain explained shortly. "The young lady has been thrown out of a carriage on her way to Salisbury. I came up and—now quick's the word, man. We want to get on!"

But the landlord had a word to say, and by and by drew him aside. "No accident, I am afraid, Captain," he muttered. "A rum business. The boy turned in as I was closing. And from what he let out—he was fair frightened—the young lady threw herself out. A mercy she was not killed 'cording to him, for they was going eight miles an hour."

"What became of the man?" the Captain asked, seeing all was known, and gripping his crop with an ugly look.

"Paid 'im off at Burgate Corner—they come down into the main road there, or you'd ha' met 'em. He went off afoot, mad, and swearing to raise your hair! I asked the lad what they was doing on the Whitsbury road, but he shut up quick at that. He wasn't here ten minutes. Mortal afeared he'd hear more of it, I fancy."

"D——d sneak! If I had been here——"

"But the young lady wasn't hurt?"

"No thanks to them! But do you keep a still tongue, my man. Least said soonest mended. Are the horses ready?"

A minute later the team jingled out, and Rachel, so weary that she could hardly stand, was handed into the chaise, the Captain plunged in after her, and they rumbled over the bridge, and took the road at a canter, the horses, stung by the cold wind that blew across the marshes, a little out of hand. The way was flat; the postboys, intent on earning their fees, pushed on. It was not the first time that Rachel had travelled that

road with the Captain, but little had she expected on that former occasion that she would ever retrace it with a heart bursting with gratitude to her companion.

Wisely he let her be, and not a word was said until they had rattled through sleeping Ringwood and were breasting the rise to the Forest, where the hill and the sandy road brought the horses to their collars. It was the girl who, harassed by fears of the reception before her, and quivering with nervousness, broke the silence. "They will be all in bed," she said, her voice betraying her alarm at the prospect.

"Not they!"

"But they'll not be expecting——"

"They will be expecting Medea," he answered grimly. "I'll wager Tom will be up."

"Oh!" she cried. "Was it Medea?" She was horror-stricken. For Medea and her chances were the talk of the house, and had reached even the schoolroom. "Suppose—suppose something had happened to her."

"Suppose something had happened to you!" he retorted. "Don't be silly, ma'am. She'll be sent over in the morning. She'll be none the worse. It is to be hoped you'll be none the worse either."

"Oh, dear, dear," she quavered, not at all reassured. "I hope I can get in without rousing anyone."

"Rousing anyone?" he replied bluntly. "We're going to rouse all hands. That's the course we are laying. It is no use whimpering, ma'am," he continued, as Rachel murmured a dismayed remonstrance. "Come aboard with a clean sheet! That's your line. Better a jobation to-night than everlasting talk to-morrow. I suppose you have the sense, young lady, to see that. Why, damme, if you are to sneak aboard through the hawse-hole, what have we come all this way for, when you are not fit to stand on your feet? No, ma'am, no, we'll pipe all hands, man the side-ropes and go aboard Captain's fashion and no sneaking.

Confound it," he added, with an irritation that was not so real as it sounded, " what are you afraid of ? "

" Lady Ellingham."

" Lady Ellingham ? And you throw yourself out of a carriage going at eight miles an hour ! Yes, you did, girl. I've heard all about it. Threw yourself out head first to escape that d——d trickster. I wish I had been there, the villain ! And you are afraid of my lady ! Pooh ! Spare your breath to cool your porridge."

Somehow the words were not harsh, and before Rachel could explain the Captain broke into one of his queer ditties :

" 'To Rodney, brave but low in cash,
Your golden gifts bespoke ! '

Ay, by gad, he got all he deserved, did Rodney !

'To Keppel, rich but not so rash,
You gave a box of oak ! '

But that's a confounded slander ! However, here we are, and there's a light in the stables." He thrust out his head and " Rattle 'em up, my lads ! " he cried. " And give 'em a hail ! Shout like blazes ! "

A moment later and he was out of the chaise and thundering at the great doors, while the postboys shouted and Tom, who had appeared on the instant, jabbered anxious questions at his elbow. Rachel, quailing at the uproar, crept out and hid herself behind him. She would fain have implored him to desist, but with her hand on his sleeve her courage failed. A light flashed in the hall windows, the heavy bolts were withdrawn, and a startled Charles, whose tousled head suggested that he had been sleeping at his post, looked out.

The Captain strode in. " Her ladyship in bed ? "

" Yes, sir. It's two o'clock."

" Call her woman then. Do you hear ? Bid her rouse my lady. And be quick, sleepy-head ! "

"Oh, no, no!" Rachel prayed. "Please, please don't!"

"Call her ladyship!" repeated the Captain, raising his voice. "Ask her to be good enough to come down. Say I've broken my leg if you like. And stir your stumps, do you hear?"

"Oh, please, please don't!" Rachel pleaded. "It's quite wrong! It is out of the question!"

But the Captain only stormed. "Off, quick, man! And bid 'em bring lights and get some of the women —Mrs. Jemmett, anyone! And you," he turned sharply on the panic-stricken girl, and thrust forward a chair, "sit there! You are not fit to stand, ma'am! And now you may look as sick as you like! The sorrier the better!

'To Keppel, rich but not so rash,
You gave a heart of oak!'

Hearts of oak—there, leave it to me, I'll spin the yarn. Hallo, Bowles!" He turned on the astonished Bowles as the butler entered, half dressed and gaping. "Get some brandy, and don't goggle your sleepy eyes at me, man! The young lady is ill, devilish ill, d'you hear —been pitched out of a chaise and the devil knows what! Had the deuce of a time! Brandy, man, and I want Mrs. Jemmett!"

A mild voice from the doorway asked, "What about Medea, Captain?"

"Oh, d—n Medea!" he returned, but with a distinct fall in his voice. "She's at the Greyhound at Fordingbridge. Go back in the chaise, Tom, and get her. Bring her up in the morning."

But poor Rachel? While Captain George strode hither and thither, and stormed, and seemed intent on making as much noise as he could, she would have given the world to sink into the floor, or to be a hundred miles away, no matter what happened to her. She wrung her hands. The house to be roused for her! The

Countess to be dragged from her bed for her! Oh, it was too much! She could have wept in pure vexation, and for a moment came near, very near to hating the man who was bringing all this trouble upon her.

But he was obdurate. He would manage the thing after his own fashion. She, all must give way to him. And when innumerable servants had peeped in on various pretences, with lights or no matter what, the moment she so much dreaded came. Lady Ellingham, in a wrapper and with her maid behind her, appeared on the stairs and came gliding down, a stately figure with a face of very dubious meaning. Surprise, wonder and displeasure were all painted on it, and seeing it Rachel did indeed wish that she could sink into the floor.

"George!" My lady's voice was pitched high, as from the last step she surveyed the scene—the girl cowering in her chair, the Captain striding to and fro, the gaping servants. "What has happened? What is it?" She held up her candle.

But the Captain was unabashed. "The matter?" he retorted. "Why, I've brought back Miss South devilish ill! She's been pitched out of the chaise—threw herself out, to speak by the log. 'Twas a trick of that d——d villain—it was as I thought. I found her on the road, lamed and by herself, and lord knows what would have happened to her if I had not found her. And she's half dead. Some of the women must put her to bed. She's not fit to do anything for herself."

But my lady still looked displeased. "I am sorry that Miss South is hurt," she said coldly. "But was it necessary to call me down?"

"I thought so," with a sort of thrust—almost a challenge in his tone. "Captain responsible, Kitty."

"I think if you had sent for Mrs. Jemmett," my lady began, and then her eyes met Rachel's, she read the timid appeal in them, marked the exhaustion stamped on the white, weary face. She saw the bandaged arm and the torn, disordered dress, and her

sympathies awoke. She deplored the event, she had the strongest reasons for disliking the Captain's part in it, but she was not hard-hearted, and she moved to Rachel's side. "I hope that you are not seriously hurt?" she asked in a gentler tone. "But you'll tell us the tale to-morrow. You should be in bed now. Mrs. Jemmett will see that you have all you require and——"

"And let someone stay with her," said the Captain bluntly. "She'll not sleep in a hurry. She's had the deuce of a time."

"Very good," my lady agreed—but thought again what a pity it was that George would mix himself up in it. She had had her suspicions before, but they were more than suspicions now. "Mrs. Jemmett, will you——" and turning from the girl, who had not found courage to say a word, she gave her orders.

But when Rachel, venturing at last on a faltering word of apology, had been borne away in the housekeeper's care, and the servants had dispersed, my lady turned on the offender. "Oh, you ridiculous man!" she said, with a gesture of despair. "Why did you do it?"

"What? Go after the girl?"

"Yes." And then, deftly shifting her ground as she saw his face darken, "And get me out of bed in this absurd fashion?"

"To stop people's tongues! And the women's tongues in particular. Oh, I know them. Still, thank ye, Kitty, you're a good sort, and I'll remember it. And now, my dear, you may go back to your beauty sleep. It's pretty near the dog-watch, ain't it? By gad I am tired!"

"Foolish, foolish man!" she said. But her eyes were soft, she could never resist him. "And you'll pay for it. You'll be a perfect wreck to-morrow. And I wish that were the worst of it! Was it——"

"Girardot? Yes, it was, the villain! The letter was a forgery. He got in and was making off with her —had bribed the postboy no doubt. He had got as far as Whitsbury on the by-road—Heaven knows where he was going to take her! Then she threw herself out, and it is Heaven's mercy that she didn't kill herself!"

"But are you quite sure——" she began, and then, "Now, don't be angry, George—but are you quite sure that she wasn't—that she didn't know——"

But George bristled up so fiercely that she stopped. "I'm sure of this," he said, "that she is as good a woman as you are, and I know no better. And she has the pluck of ten men. Does it look like collusion when she threw herself out of that chaise at——"

"Look here, my lad!" An unexpected voice broke in on their conference. My lord in a fluttering dressing-gown, and with a candle in his hand, looked down from the landing. "Suppose you stop quarrelling about the filly, and tell me if you've brought the mare back! If you've lamed her, George——"

"She's as sound as I am," the Captain said meekly. "I haven't stirred a hair on her."

"Well," with a mischievous chuckle, "I hope that you can say the same of the young one! Oh, George, George, it runs in the family after all! And my lady thought you a Joseph!"

"Go to blazes!" said the Captain.

"No, I'll go to bed, as you permit it," my lord rejoined, and as he retreated down the corridor he sang:

"Oh, they loved and they rode in a hackney chaise,
And 'My own' says he, and 'Oh don't' she prays.
But the night was dark and the spark aflame,
And the chaise was close and his lips the same,
And what does a tender 'Oh don't' avail,
When pins are fickle and laces are frail?"

"D—n it!" cried the Captain savagely. "Fred, I'll break your bones!"

My lord's laughter died away above. But there was a very odd look on my lady's face as her eyes followed his retreat. She breathed quickly.

CHAPTER XXVIII

CAPTAIN DUNSTAN flattered himself, in his seaman's simplicity, that he had stayed the flood of talk. Of course he had merely guided it into another channel, and vainly did Mrs. Jemmett, staunch in her defence of the family, set herself against it. "I'll never believe it till I see it!" she declared, her cap-ribbons quivering with indignation as she stirred her tea. "A little whey-faced thing as came sneaking into the house without so much as Bo! to throw at a goose! And took her tea in this very room and sat in that very chair and was thankful! Yes, I say it, Bowles, thankful for a word of notice!"

Bowles reflected. His back to the hearth, he was taking his "morning," a silver measure of small beer. He looked into it and apparently he found inspiration in it. "At any rate, she didn't put on no airs," he said.

"Airs?" The housekeeper's cap-ribbons shook again. "I should think not! Who is she to put on airs, I should like to know? The governess, and a poor piece at that! But it's not her. It is the Captain what gets me. He that was ever so steady. I'd no more have believed it of him than of old Cæsar on the chain there!"

"Ay, ma'am, but that is where the trouble is!" Bowles said. "If the Captain weren't steady, and I'm sure it's a wonder he is, and blood thicker than water, there'd be no trouble. It'd arrange itself, Mrs. J."

Mrs. Jemmett frowned. "Bowles! Remember

yourself ! " she said. " Not in this room if you please. Besides," she continued, yielding to temptation, " there's two goes to that, and though it may be only her slyness, I'll not think as bad of her as that. But her impudence ? To think of the likes of her lifting her eyes to the family ! Why, it'd be a disgrace to the name as would never be wiped out ! "

But Bowles was cynical. " It wouldn't be the first as we know," he said. " My lord's rode the name pretty hard, and not much harm done."

" That's a different thing," the housekeeper replied tartly. " Not that I'm defending him and his creatures, heaven knows ! I'd like to see 'em all tied up and whipped. And if my lady weren't an angel, and I don't care who knows it, there'd ha' been mud thrown before this, enough to——"

" Now, Mrs. J., Mrs. J., you're taking sides."

" Well, I do think of the family, Bowles ! And I declare I could almost find it in my heart to speak to the man myself ! "

" What ? My lord ! You never mean it ! "

" No, drat the man ! Nor did I say it. You know what I mean. To the Captain, of course."

" Well," he decided thoughtfully, " I wouldn't if I was you. He'll hear enough from her ladyship. Did you mind her face last night, leastways this morning ? Well, I did, and you may take it from me she no more liked all that rumpus than we liked being called out of our beds. No, ma'am. And I shall be surprised if the young lady is here this day two weeks."

" But will that turn him, d'you think, Bowles ? "

" It depends, ma'am, on how my lady handles him. He's hard to drive but easy to lead. And if anyone has the length of his foot it's her ladyship."

" Well, I'll never believe the thing till I see it," Mrs. Jemmett rejoined. " A little mouse of a child with no more about her than a curl-paper ! Why, Jane the housemaid is good looks beside her, to say

nothing of Miss Froyle, as it's my belief would have him to-morrow and thankful—and come for the purpose if you ask me. And as fine a figure of a lady as you'd wish to see. I declare I can't think what the men find to see in this chit! First the tutor, and then the Captain!"

The butler smirked. "Well, ma'am, I've looked her over myself. And though she's slim, I've noticed her, and she's not so thin as she looks, and she's well shaped about the——"

"Bowles!"

"I was going to say, the figure, ma'am."

Mrs. Jemmett stared. "Well, I declare! You've looked her over, have you, and—well, to be sure! Indeed? But where women are concerned, men are fools and always will be."

"The sect, Mrs. J., the sect!" Bowles replied with feeling as he eyed her ample proportions. "We're weak, ma'am. We're weak! The slaves of fancy."

"Slaves of fiddle-de-dee! You'll be looking at Jane next, I suppose. Let me catch you at it, my man! Well, I never! If I let my fancy run away with me like that——"

"Does it never run away, Mrs. J.?" the butler asked softly.

Whatever the answer—and a topic so delicate is better abandoned—Bowles was right on one point. If Onions was to be believed, there was no braver man in the service than his master. But when the Captain presented himself some two hours later in my lady's room, he certainly wore a guilty air which he strove to cover by making the most of some news that had come in by the mail. It was weighty news, but with a good conscience he might not have published the matter with so excessive an air of triumph.

"Kitty, give me joy!" he announced. "Give me joy, my dear! I've heard from Whitehall, and by George I've got the *Polyphemus*. The *Polyphemus*!

Seventy-four, French built, the finest lines you ever saw! A perfect duck, as handy as a frigate, and as fast on a wind as half the fourth-rates!"

But my lady was not to be moved. She preserved a provoking calmness. "Well, I'm pleased, George," she said, "if it pleases you."

"Pleases me? I should think it does please me! The *Polyphemus*! Why, half the men between the Hamoaze and Harwich will be wanting to cut my throat! It's great news, my dear. Splendid news! I'm to commission her at Devonport, rig her out there, and when she's ready take her round to Spithead, to join Lord Nelson's squadron—but there!" He stopped abruptly. "That's secret orders and I shouldn't have told you, so do you keep a still tongue about that, Kitty. There's great work afoot, but I mustn't out with it yet. I'll wager though we shall give the country something to talk about this time!"

Still my lady refused to be carried away. "You will be at sea for some time then?" she asked thoughtfully. She did not seem to be displeased by the prospect.

"Why?" He spoke with a sudden drop in his tone, for he saw her drift. "Do you want to get rid of me? But, lord, to get, of all the craft I know, the *Polyphemus*. I could kick myself for joy of it!"

"But——"

"Confound it, Kitty," he said ruefully, "and I thought you would be as pleased as I am!"

"Never mind about the ship for a minute," my lady said. "I want to speak to you about something else."

"And I can think of nothing else! But there!" He threw himself into a chair. "Speak on!" He looked uneasy.

"You know, you made an absurd fuss last night," my lady said. "But that's a small thing, and I won't say that I don't understand your reason. But have

you considered—I'm sure that you know very well what I am going to say—how far you are going with that girl ? And what is to come of it ? It's no good jumping up and down like that, George ! If you are just amusing yourself with her it is bad, and it is unlike you and hard on her. Though," my lady continued with contempt, " as the little fool has lost her heart once already since she has been here, I don't know that that matters or that I have much sympathy to spare for her ! Still, she seems to have behaved well last night, and I'm willing to think the best of her—to think at any rate that she deserves a better fate than to be played with."

" I agree."

" Then——"

" But I'm not playing with her ! " He sprang to his feet. " I am going to make her my wife."

My lady shrugged her shoulders. " I was afraid so," she said, unmoved by his violence. " I was afraid that you had that in your mind, George. But you haven't spoken to her ? "

" No ! "

" Not——"

" Not a word ! "

" Then," she rejoined, with a sigh of relief, and her face cleared, " there is no harm done yet. Thank God for that ! She has no claim on you, and I implore you, George,"—my lady's voice was very serious—" to listen to me before you give her one. I beseech you to look at the thing as if the case were not your own. Can you say that she is a fit wife for you—for a Dunstan ? She may be a good girl, I am not saying that she is not, though she is a simpleton. It is not that. But she is not of any family, she is not of our world, and she is not of the class in which you should look for a wife. You do not know even who she is."

" She is a parson's daughter."

" A poor curate's, I suppose—if her tale be true.

But all governesses are curate's daughters. It is the common tale, and as often true as their references. But grant it true, she is no wife for you. She is a dependant, almost a servant. And whatever you say —there, it is no good bobbing up and down !—a nobody. You can't get out of that. And you ought to marry somebody, and somebody—I don't care whether she has a penny or not—in our class."

"Charlotte Froyle, I suppose ? "

"Why not—if you like her ? "

"But," he exploded, "I don't like her ! "

"Well, at any rate," she said, rising in defence of her friend, "she was not in love and madly in love—yes, George, it is no good wincing, it's the truth—with another man a month ago."

"She wasn't in love with him last night ! " he retorted. "I don't think you quite grasp what she did. She risked her life—and never in all my time, boarding or cutting out, have I run greater risk—to escape from him ! If she don't bear the marks of it to-day I'm a liar ! She threw herself out when it was just odd or even whether she broke her neck or no ! I tell you, Kitty," he continued, beginning to stride the room in his excitement, "that girl is one in a thousand and she's the girl for me. She has a spirit and a courage in that little body—that dear little body, yes, I'll say it, damme, and not be faced down by you—that would not shame a Nelson ! That would shrink from nothing and count no cost if duty led her that way ! I've seen her tried three times and—not worthy ? not of my class ? I tell you there never was a woman more fit to be the wife of a seaman and bear a seaman's children ! And the wife of a sailor and the mother of my children she shall be, God willing—if she will have me ! "

"If ? " my lady cried in equal wrath and contempt —but in truth she was touched, and her anger, if not her scorn, was forced. "If ? Are you fool enough to suppose that she would refuse you ? "

"To-day? Yes. Did you not say a moment ago that she was in love with another man a month back?"

"Yes, the little fool! And probably is to-day for all this fuss and outcry! But if you think that with all you have to offer she will not jump at you——"

"I do think so," he insisted. "If she is the girl I take her for, yes I do. My dear, you don't know her. You are on the quarter-deck and she is forward and she keeps her distance and behaves according! You don't know what a brave heart she has, what a spirit, what a courage!"

"I tell you what it is, George!" my lady said viciously. "I am sick of hearing of her courage. Her courage? You talk of nothing else, while I know that ever since she has been here she has been a cause of trouble. First that wretched man and then you! Oh, George, it is impossible—impossible that you can be such a silly! And when I look at you and see you tired and no more than the shadow of yourself this morning and think that she is the cause of it, and that she has come between you and me—oh, I wish to heaven," my lady cried with passion, "that I had never seen her! Wasn't it enough that she must risk your life in that wretched duel?"

"She?"

"Well, didn't she? Don't look at me like that. What—what is the matter? Wasn't she the cause?"

"Of the duel? No, by G—d, she wasn't! Did you think that, Kitty? She had nothing in the world to do with it! Not a jot except that she tried to stop it."

"Then who——" but even before she finished the sentence, fear leapt into her eyes.

"Who? Another person. It doesn't matter who. It is over and done with. Hang the duel. Let's hear no more about it. I'm sick of it!"

"But—no," she said with decision, "you must tell me, George!" She breathed quickly, a hand pressed

to her breast. "If it was not about this girl you fought, who—oh! You don't mean that it was—about me?"

"Confound it, Kitty!" Impatiently he put the thing away with his hand. "What does it matter if it was? It is over and done with. And it was no fault of yours. The blackguard said something that he should not have said. That was all."

"About me?"

He nodded sulkily. "Well, in a way. And I wish to heaven that I had lamed him for it."

"And I didn't know!" My lady spoke softly, and there were tears in her eyes. "Oh, George, my best, best friend, what shall I say to you? What shall I—and now," she continued, with a sob half suppressed, "I am going to lose you. She has stolen you from me—and I hate her for it!"

George shuffled his feet uncomfortably. He abhorred a scene. "Well, you can do this," he said earnestly. "You can be a friend to her, my dear. She needs one, and will need one. More, I want you to promise to keep her here till I come back. I look to be away three months, and how am I to keep her safe till I come back? Or find her if she is not here?"

My lady looked at him, and there were doubt and trouble in her gaze. "If I thought it was for your good," she said with a sigh, "I would do far, far more for you than that. But I don't, oh, George, I don't. I can't. She may be all you say, and good. And yet she may be quite unfit to be your wife. There are only Fred's life and the boy's between you—and the Folly and all this. And you ought to consider that. You may think her this or that here, where there is no one to compare with her; but if you saw her in town? What figure would she make in town—in the Square? She has neither presence, nor birth, nor training. She has never learned the way of it, she could never hold her own. You would see her beside others——"

"Charlotte Froyle, I suppose!" he cried. "You

would have me marry her ? That doll ? That pattern of primness and propriety ? Why, you are only a simpleton after all, or you are blind, my lady ! Or you would see that this girl would fill, and has the spirit to fill, any station she is called to, and fill it so that those about her will know that she is there ! Ay, any station —though God forbid, God forbid, indeed, that she should ever take yours ! She is quarter-deck right through, my girl, and will send 'em to leeward fast enough when there is occasion. I know, I know, I tell you."

"You foolish, foolish man !" my lady said. And sighed and smiled.

"Not a bit of it ! You'll see. But you haven't promised me yet. You must promise me you will keep her, Kitty. I shall be miserable if I don't know that she is with you, and safe."

"But George," she protested, "it is the most absurd thing ! I am to keep her whether I will or no. And what if she won't have you after all ?"

"That is my business."

"Or suppose you change your mind ?"

"Well, that is my business too."

"You are not going to speak to her now ?"

"No," he owned gloomily. "It would be useless or I would—within the hour. She is not ready for it, and I'm not such a puppy, I don't think so well of myself—Fred has told me often enough that I am a bear —as to believe that I can carry a girl by storm ; nor so ill of her as to believe that she will take me to-day if she was in love with another man yesterday. One foot on board and one on shore—she's not of that kind. No, I must give her time. But when I come ashore again and have made her know what I want—well, she may not take me then. But at any rate I shall have saved her from that scoundrel. You will promise me, Kitty ?"

"Well," she said at last, unwillingly and with

averted eyes. "I will promise, George." After all, she reflected, the future might hold many chances. The girl might see another, or he might change his mind.

He was not quite satisfied. "And you'll play fair, Kitty? You'll not cross my hawse?"

"You dear silly man," she cried, "with your hawses! I suppose that you mean that I am not to set her against you?"

"Well, about that."

"Well, I won't then. There! I won't even——" She looked at him half quizzically, half tenderly. "You know, George, you are very, very simple after all."

"And what then?" he asked suspiciously. "You won't what, eh?"

"I won't do what nine women out of ten would do, stupid man. I won't tell her that if she marries you she will ruin you. Though if she is what you think her, that would checkmate you, if anything would!"

He stared. "Lord!" he exclaimed in amazement. "What women are, the best of them!"

"Ay!" she replied with venom. "You will find that out some day, even if she is all you think! She'll surprise you, my man! I know she's an angel now! She is all smiles and syrup! She has no faults, no tempers, no whims, no tricks, no will of her own—she's perfect! Because you love her!"

He nodded, smiling foolishly.

My lady stamped her foot with passion. "And I hate her! I hate her, for with her big eyes and her silly child's face she has robbed me of my brother! And I am to bear with her and hug her and fondle her! Oh, George," my lady continued, and there were angry tears in her eyes, "you are a monster!"

"But if you gain a sister?" said foolish George.

"Gain a sister?" she retorted passionately. "Gain a fiddlestick! Go away, go away, and let me cry by myself!"

CHAPTER XXIX

THE high may steal a horse where the low may not look over the wall; which in this connection means that about a governess there must be no scandal. Rachel thought often of this as she lay by during the next two days, thankful for the prostration that, while it privileged her to hide herself, dulled to some extent the sharpness of recollection. That she had escaped from a peril, the very thought of which and of the struggle that had attended it wrung her nerves—for this, as she lay in the darkened room, she was deeply, most deeply grateful. And while the memory of the lover who had not scrupled to plot her ruin now awoke in her only fear and abhorrence, the man who had saved her, and to save her had not spared himself, came in, it is certain, for a full share in her thoughts.

He had saved her, or she had saved herself. She had escaped from the snare so cunningly laid for her. And so far well. But, alas, the matter did not end there. The incidents that had attended her adventure forced themselves again and again on her mind, and she saw herself the butt of a hundred shafts, of a hundred hateful surmises. She recalled the disapproving face with which the Countess had greeted her, and the servants' wonder. She reflected in how serious, how odious a light scandal would set the whole matter; and a score of times she stifled a groan as she sank lower in the bed, thankful for the few

hours that intervened before she must face the censorious eyes that awaited her.

He had been kind, oh, he had been kind! But he had also been cruel. And had he been wise?

She saw no one for two days except Priscilla, who waited on her—and the housekeeper. Mrs. Jemmett visited her early, conveyed her ladyship's orders that she should keep her bed, inquired if she needed the apothecary. But the housekeeper said little and asked no questions, and her silence, her pinched lips and guarded looks warned the girl what she must expect when she rose.

"I shall have to go," she thought, too weary to rebel. "I shall have to go." She had no doubt that the Countess would condemn her. For what could be more unbecoming, more dubious, in a governess than what had happened? But with her mind made up to the worst she rose in the end with a firmer courage.

In Lady Ann she met her first trial—an Ann affectionate, but strident, shameless, burning with curiosity, and primed in regions which she was forbidden to visit. "Do tell," she urged, wreathing herself about her unfortunate preceptress. "You'll tell me, won't you? Did you throw yourself out? Really, truly, throw yourself out? And was it—now it's no good pretending, Southy—was it Mr. Girardot? And did he try to——"

"Ann!" Rachel cried, horrified. "For shame! You should know nothing about such things! Don't you know how unbecoming——"

"But I do know. I know a lot, and you may as well tell me. Tom told Bodmin, and he——"

"Then Tom ought to be ashamed of himself!" Rachel retorted in a rage. "And you too, Lady Ann. I am surprised at you. You should not talk to the servants. No, I'll not listen to you. And I am not going to tell you anything about it."

"Now you are going to be a beast!" Ann decided. "If you don't tell me, I shall think there's something shocking! And that's what they all think. Tom said that he was sure that Mr. Girardot tried to——"

"Ann!" Rachel rose in her wrath.

But the child was not to be silenced. "Well, if you won't tell me," she said, "you'll have to tell mother. She's going to send for you at twelve o'clock. And Jane expects that it was not all on one side, for she says he'd a voice that would lure a bird off a bush, and she's sure he——"

Rachel did silence her then—she was furious. But, after all, this was a trifle compared with the ordeal of encountering Lady Ellingham—compared with the moment when the Countess, seated in state in her room, looked up from her needlework and pointed to a chair. "Be so good as to sit there," she said. "I hope that you are better?" with a glance at the bandaged wrist. "If you do not feel equal to talking to-day, I will see you to-morrow."

Rachel murmured that she was much better.

My lady, after allowing her eyes to dwell for a moment on the girl's face, dropped them to her work again. "Then you will perhaps," she said, in the tone of one sitting in judgment, "tell me what happened. I have heard but a confused story, and I think that in view of your position with us I should know all, Miss South."

"Certainly," Rachel assented.

"Will you tell me then?" And as the girl hesitated, uncertain where to begin, the Countess looked up. "You have nothing to conceal, I take it?"

"Nothing!" Rachel said firmly, and with an effort she began her story.

When she came, however, no little confused, to Girardot's appearance, "Why did you not get out at once?" Lady Ellingham asked.

"I was surprised, and the chaise was moving before

I"—she began to stammer—" before I knew who it was, or—or could think what to do."

" Ah ! "

" And when I knew," the girl continued in evident distress, " I could not get out—in the road, in the dark. He said that he would leave me at the next stage."

" That was Fordingbridge ? Just so. But he did not. Then why did you not get out there ? "

Poor Rachel's face burned. " I tried to get out," she said, " but he asked me did I want to make a scandal. And he said that he would get out short of Salisbury, and before——"

" Before you did anything," my lady said, " you were going on ? "

" Yes."

" Along with him ? I see."

Rachel rose. " Lady Ellingham," she protested, trembling, " if you do not believe me——"

" Be good enough to sit down," my lady rejoined. " I did not say that I did not believe you. But as I know what had passed, between you and this person, it is not only natural, Miss South, it is right that I should sift your story. It is my duty to you and to myself to do so. You say that this meeting was quite unexpected—on your part ? "

" Absolutely." Rachel was almost in tears.

" And unwelcome ? "

" Hateful ! "

" Very well. Then be so good as to go on."

Rachel did so with an effort, but when she came with hot cheeks to the climax and to the moment when Girardot put his arm round her and she threw herself out of the carriage, the Countess's hands fell on her lap and she looked up. " You might have been killed ! " she said.

" I—I did not hurt myself much. I fell on the grass, I think. I did not feel it."

My lady measured the speaker with frowning eyes. She seemed to be considering whether she was really telling the truth. "And what then?"

The girl, relieved that the worst was over, described how she had hidden in the thicket, watched the search, seen the carriage at last move off. Finally, how with only one shoe she had trudged along the dark road, espied the light, reached the farm.

"With one shoe?"

"I had lost the other in the ditch."

"Which one was it?"

"The right."

"Then will you be good enough to let me see that foot?"

For a moment the girl's face flamed. She hesitated.

"I think," my lady said coldly, "you will be well advised to let me see it." Then, "Do not be a fool, girl," she continued. "I suppose you wish the truth to be known."

Unwillingly Rachel removed the stocking. The slender white foot was bruised and blistered, covered with scratches, with here and there the black mark of a thorn.

Lady Ellingham nodded. "I see," she said. "Put on your stocking, child. Facts, you know, speak for themselves. And then I understand Captain Dunstan found you at the farm—I shall see Mrs. Mew—and brought you down to Fordingbridge on Medea."

"Yes," Rachel said, thankful that the tale was told.

"Have you been in the habit of riding?"

"I have never ridden before."

"Ah!" my lady said, her eyes on her work. A long pause. "Well, while you are here, Coker might give you a lesson or two. Lady Ann's skirt would fit you, I dare say."

Rachel could hardly believe her ears. Then there was to be no question of her going. Impulsively she

put her thought into words. "Then I am not to go?" she faltered.

My lady smiled. "Not on account of this," she said. "If—if your conscience is clear, Miss South."

"It is!" Rachel cried. "But I feared that you might think that I was to blame."

"Why?"

"Because," Rachel owned meekly, "I had been so foolish before."

"But there is an end of that now, I presume?"

"Oh, yes!"

The Countess, bending over her work, seemed to be lost in thought. Presently, "It was fortunate that Captain Dunstan followed you," she observed.

The girl did not answer, and my lady looking up saw that there were tears in her eyes. "I was saying," she repeated, "that it was fortunate that Captain Dunstan followed you."

"It was so very, very kind of him," Rachel said, her lips quivering. "If you would please to thank him."

"I am afraid I cannot do that. He left this morning to take over a ship at Plymouth. Do you know," the Countess continued with a sharp look, "I think it was good of him, Miss South. But I am not surprised, for I know no one who has a kinder heart, though he does not wear it on his sleeve." She waited for Rachel to say something, but Rachel was silent, and the Countess drew a conclusion the opposite of that which some would have drawn. "You know, I suppose," she continued, "that he is a very distinguished officer. Lord Nelson thinks highly of him, and it is at his request that he is to be attached to his squadron."

"It was very wonderful of him," Rachel murmured.

"Of Lord Nelson?"

"No, that he should think of me," Rachel explained

with a simplicity that my lady at first distrusted and then, after a glance at the girl's face, accepted.

"I think it was. But he has his reward for his unselfishness, for he has got the ship that he wanted and sails for St. Helen's within a week or ten days. But I wish he were safe ashore. I fear there will be danger if what I hear is true. You know, I suppose, that he has been twice wounded?"

"No, I did not know."

"No? Then he has not told you?"

"Oh, no," Rachel exclaimed in surprise at the question.

"He has not talked to you much?"

"No."

"Not as you came back from Whitsbury?"

"Oh, no. I was too tired. And no doubt he was thinking of his ship."

"He did not know of it then. But he is not a person who talks much, or likes to be thanked. Indeed, I should like to know what he said when you thanked him."

"I did not," Rachel confessed. "I did not think ——" She stopped.

"What?"

"That he would care about it, Lady Ellingham. I thought that——"

"That it was a small matter perhaps?"

"Well—to him."

"I do not think that Lord Ellingham thought that it was a small matter—to Medea! There, you need not look so frightened! Medea is none the worse. But——" Lady Ellingham paused—had she not been generous enough, foolish enough? Had she not paid her debt to him? Surely he could expect no more. Then she relented. "But I think you are mistaken in one thing. Captain Dunstan thought a good deal of—of your safety. He inquired after you every morning until he left."

Rachel did not answer, but my lady saw that her eyes were wet. And, "There, silly, silly woman I am!" she thought. "I have not only not crossed his hawse, as he calls it, but I am sending this child away to brood over him and his generosity—when I do believe that she had not a thought of him before." She paused awhile, and then aloud, "Your father was in orders, was he not?" she asked.

"Yes," Rachel replied in surprise at the sudden change of subject. Lady Ellingham was certainly very odd this morning.

"Had he a cure?"

"He was Vicar of Alden in Devonshire. He was a great-nephew," the girl explained with modest pride, "of Dr. South, who was Chaplain to King Charles the Second."

Lady Ellingham's needle hung suspended. "Indeed?" she said. "I have read his sermons. I think there is one in the *Tatler*. And what brothers and sisters have you?"

"Only one sister, who is younger."

"Ah! Well"—unconsciously the Countess expressed her thoughts aloud—"that is to the good."

Rachel stared, but did not understand and ventured on no comment.

"I will speak to Coker about your riding," Lady Ellingham continued. "It will be good for Ann to have a companion, as I cannot often go out with her. And she is rather troublesome at breakfast now that we have company. I think it will be well for you to come down with her for a time. She may be less in the way perhaps if you are with her. You seem to have gained some control over her. I think—that is all now, Miss South."

Rachel rose. She hesitated. "I think you are very kind to me," she said timidly.

"Yes," Lady Ellingham was on the point of answering, "I am, you simpleton! Kinder than you think,

and kinder to you than to myself!" But she contented herself with a good-humoured nod of dismissal.

When the girl was gone, however, she rose, cast her work aside, and moving to a mirror surveyed herself in it. "Oh, you fool, you!" she murmured. "Cutting your own throat and helping your best, your only friend to lower himself! And all because you are too soft-hearted and he has taken a fancy to that child's baby face and pleading eyes! When you ought instead to be choking her. Kitty, Kitty, I don't know which is the bigger fool, you or he!"

CHAPTER XXX

RIDING LESSONS

"HALLO, Ann!" Lord Robert exclaimed next morning, looking up from his plate. "Who has curry-combed that tangle of yours so early?" Then, "Oh, crikey!" he added in a different tone, and he scrambled with a beaming smile to his feet.

It had been Rachel's plan to be seated before the party began to come down, and to be gone, were it possible, before all were at table; for she regarded this first appearance as a formidable thing. But she had reckoned without Ann, who, usually early, chose on this morning to be late, and moreover she had not remembered that it was a hunting morning. When she made her entrance, therefore, shyly following her pupil, three of the men were already in possession. Sir Austin was warming his tightly breeched old knees before the fire and did not see her. The chaplain was at the side-table, taking a morning draught of ale. The beau alone therefore saw the unusual. Rachel's adventure had shed a halo of romance about the girl, her seclusion had heightened this, and Lord Robert saw a chance of sport.

"Splendid!" he said with ready geniality. "You are mending Ann's manners already, Miss South. She's only early when she isn't wanted. And begad, getting up early suits you. Blooming this morning! Do you sit here." He dragged back the chair beside his own.

But the chaplain also thought the occasion good.

He too bustled forward. "Hate a jealous rider, don't you, Miss South?" he said. "Take this chair." He drew back another. "Not afraid to face the light, I'll wager. None the worse, I hope—ha! ha!—for your little adventure?"

"Now don't come thrusting in, parson," Lord Robert retorted. "Miss South is going to make my tea."

"La, Bobbie," Ann drawled, her quick eyes at work. "How funny you are! You never ask me to make your tea!"

"No, my dear, not since you left a sample of your mane in my cup! And I'm not drawn by beauty with a horse-hair, as the poet says. When your head is as neat as Miss South's you shall. Oh, come, Miss South, you are not going to be so cruel as to sit down there!"

"Thank you," Rachel replied with composure, though she was anything but grateful for his attentions. "I prefer to be farther from the fire."

"Too hot? Well, perhaps it is. I think I'll move down too."

"Lady Ann," Rachel said firmly, "sit here, if you please."

The chaplain grinned. "Beware of all, but most beware of men!" he hummed *sotto voce*. "A little pork-pie, Miss South? May I help you?"

"Donkey!" the unabashed Bobbie struck in. "Do you think that Miss South lives on pork meat? A little dew, a butterfly's wing and a flake of. honey! Allow me—the honey!"

"La, Bobbie, you are funny!" Ann drawled.

"No, no honey, thank you," Rachel said. The beau meant no harm, he meant at worst a little amusement. But the chaplain's grin put an unpleasant point on his attentions, and unused to persiflage Rachel was thankful when the door opened. But it opened only to admit Lord Ellingham, and her heart

sank. Another man! And, she feared, another tormentor!

But my lord, who with his boyish smile had done more mischief in three years than Bobbie would do in his whole life, seemed nevertheless to bring a fresher air into the room. "Hallo!" he exclaimed, nodding pleasantly. "Miss South here? Glad to see you about again. Quite recovered? That's well. My lady in no end of a flutter about you. Gad!" as he turned to Sir Austin, "there'll be a burning scent when the sun is up and the frost is off the grass."

It was a part of his charm—and how much had he exercised it!—that knack of putting others at their ease, of addressing them as equals, of taking for granted their interest in all that concerned him. Rachel felt the attraction, and was grateful to him; and perhaps owned the attraction not the less because in his hunting dress he made a gallant show. He drew off the others' attention—that too was a part of his tact—and she was able to take her meal in peace. A few minutes later Lady Ellingham appeared, followed by the handsome, languid Charlotte. The Countess greeted her dependant with a pleasant word, and as she passed re-tied Ann's hair-riband. But over Miss Froyle's face a cloud fell. The addition to the party was not to her mind.

They fell to talking about the prospects of the day, then passed to a matter that in a twinkling riveted Rachel's attention. In that house interest in the subject was natural, apart from George's share in it, for the neighbourhood of Portsmouth and Southampton gave a naval tone to their thoughts. St. Helen's Roads and Spithead were household words, and admirals were among their nearest neighbours. But indeed many were the houses from one end of England to the other in which the chances of the Baltic expedition were being discussed that morning; many the hearts it set fluttering. Its object—to detach Denmark

from Napoleon's interest—was no longer a secret; the *Gazette* of the day before had announced it, and not a few troubled not only for the safety of those whom they loved, but for the issue. A disaster must much increase the danger of an invasion.

To Rachel it was all new, all enlightenment. She had not been in the way of hearing such things debated by those who were behind the scenes, and it was with painful interest that she listened. Why painful, she could hardly say, nor why her colour ebbed. She told herself that it was the risk that so many gallant men were running that moved her, and not the risk that the one she knew was running. For kind as he had been to her, he stood so far from her that it seemed presumption to feel an anxiety on his behalf which those nearest to him affected to disclaim.

"George thought," his brother said presently, "that they should have given the command to Nelson."

"But George thinks of nobody else!" Lord Robert replied. "If you ask me"—he paused to select a rasher of bacon—"I think Nelson is a bit rash and they are right. He'll come to grief one of these days, will George's pet. Suppose he had had a fleet at Teneriffe in—when was it? Ninety-seven?—instead of a ship or two? He got a confounded licking there, as it was."

"Ay, but if he had led the first attack himself? That's what George says! He swears that he would have put the shoe on the other foot."

"But that's all maybe! Maybe he'd have got killed first round! And Parker's a safer man in my opinion. It's not Vinegar Parker, it's Vinegar Parker's son, you know. Anyway, it'll be a bloody business if the Danes stand to it. Devilish stubborn fellows, mind you, the Danes! Stubborn fellows! None of your sing-song get-up-to-morrow Dons."

"Ha! ha! Danes and Dons!" said Sir Austin.

"I wish," Lady Ellingham murmured, but with no

show of feeling, "that George were safe back again."

"Gad, he'll be as happy as a schoolboy," his brother declared. "Sure to be in the thick of it, and nothing he likes better. Rather him than I! Cold weather, north winds and the bulkheads down in his cabin. Ugh! Who'd be a sailor?"

"It is not a polished service," Sir Austin pronounced gravely. "Rough, very rough! George, of course—but, oh dear, I have met some dreadful examples! Impossible! Quite impossible!"

"Hard knocks and no prize-money this cruise!"

"I'm afraid so," my lady assented, handling the urn. "Poor George!"

"But George hasn't done badly," Lord Robert suggested. "I suppose if he has made a thousand in the last five years he has made twenty?"

"He made fifteen in the *Medora*," agreed my lord, rising and moving to the side-table to help himself. "But that was in a frigate, of course—all the money's made in the frigates. And plaguey hard knocks for it too, my lad! It would not suit your genius, Bobbie, as well as fluttering round the petticoats?"

"Now do I flutter?" Bobbie protested. "'Pon honour," he continued, lowering his voice and addressing Lady Ellingham—he was sitting beside her, "take that tempestuous little petticoat over yonder—it is not from me she's in danger. Whoever it is, it is not me, my lady."

Unfortunately Lord Ellingham on his way back to the table had stopped to speak to Rachel—he was at that instant speaking to her; and this put a point on the beau's words that he perhaps did not intend. The Countess, however, whatever she thought, gave no sign. "I am sure that Miss South," she said, "if you mean Miss South, is in no danger."

"Ah!" virtuously. "Good job too. A nice little thing. Good manners."

My lord as he sat down took up the old thread.

"Anyway," he said, "George won't be the last in at the death, I'll wager! Lucky dog too! Sure to come out all right."

"Don't!" my lady's voice rose sharply. "Don't say that!"

"Touch wood, eh? Oh, all right, my lady. But God bless me, don't cry out before you are hurt!"

In an instinctive reaching out for sympathy, Lady Ellingham glanced down the table. She could hardly have said whether she desired or feared to see that which she saw. The girl was so absorbed in the discussion, and so avid for more, that she was unconscious of observation; and her parted lips, her suspended breath, her tragic eyes told a tale. "Little fool," my lady thought, with something of fellow-feeling, yet something of contempt also. "I do believe—and yesterday she loved another man, and may love another to-morrow!" And drawn one way by antagonism and another by sympathy, she could have at once kissed the girl and boxed her ears. Her jealousy decided her, and, "Miss South," she said sharply, "you may take Ann upstairs. And be good enough to see that her hair-band is properly tied to-morrow."

Recalled by the snub, Rachel rose in confusion, and dragged away the reluctant Ann. But in the hall Ann rebelled. She was firmly set on seeing the hunting party start from the door, and Rachel went up alone, her thoughts in a whirl. This first breakfast in public which she had anticipated with so much misgiving now stood for nothing. She could think only of the talk at the table, and of the wider world and the wider issues it had opened to her. Admirals' names flitted across her mind, she heard the crash of mighty fleets, the booming of guns, the North Sea breaking as she had heard the sea break in winter storms on the shore before the cottage. She trembled as she pictured these things, while they who should

have trembled were so cold, so indifferent, they did not seem to care. And he had been so kind to her, he had acted so generously, thought so wisely for her —he who had so many and so much graver things to think of !

The bulkheads down in his cabin ! She did not know what it meant, but it had a wretched sound. And as she looked out on the bare leafless trees and the herbage white with frost where the cold rays of the sun had not touched it, she shivered ; thinking of the biting winds, the decks swept by freezing spray, the thud of the waves as they struck the mounting bows. A man's work ? Yes, and more than a man's. She saw him not as he was—for in truth he was at that moment snugly ensconced in his room at the Fountain at Plymouth—but as a heroic figure, high on some fancied poop, riding the storm, facing the gale, wind-blown, magnificent !

But she thought of him very humbly, and of any question of love as between her and him she did not dream. At the Folly he was a great man, my lord's brother ; but on the sea, as she saw him, by the light of what she had heard that morning, he loomed stupendous. Even if she had not so lately surrendered her heart to another that the idea was shameful and degrading, even if love had not come to seem a thing to distrust and shun, he stood so far from her that the thought did not occur to her. But she did feel warm gratitude to him, as she recalled his kindness, and deep anxiety as she measured his danger. " He'll not be the last in it ! " my lord had said. No, she was sure of that, sure, as she clasped her hands and fervently thought a prayer for him ! No, he would not be the last in it !

And they, the others, cared so little ! They were so indifferent—though he might never come back.

Until now the events of the great world had possessed little interest for the girl. She could not have said

whether Pitt was a Whig or a Tory! But now all was changed. Henceforth her ears were greedily open to every scrap of news or of rumour; and had her time been wholly spent as before in the solitude of the schoolroom, she would have been miserable. But day by day she found herself taken more and more into the life of the house, her unaffected simplicity aiding the process. Sir Austin condescended to pay her stately compliments, my lord was hearty and cheery; she learned how to keep Lord Robert in check and the chaplain, whom she disliked, at a distance. Miss Froyle, it is true, ignored her presence when she could, and greeted her with a stare when she could not; and my lady was changeable after an odd, disconcerting fashion, at one moment almost cordial, at another abashing her with a formal word, or wounding her by a sharp order that sent her smarting from the room.

Unfortunately for every kind word there was a snub; for the Countess's goodwill was continually outweighed by two feelings that, inconsistent as they were, swayed her by turns. The one she knew to be only too well based and not all ignoble. Against the other, a haunting vague suspicion of which she had never been able wholly to rid herself, she struggled, but only with partial success. Shaken off, it recurred with every fresh proof of the girl's power to charm.

Yet, uncertain and fickle as my lady seemed, she was as good as her word in a matter that caused some talk in the house. "If you please, miss," Priscilla said one day, entering as Rachel was closing the lesson-books and preparing to replace them, "Mr. Coker wishes to know if you will begin your riding lessons this morning?"

Rachel turned from the shelf in a flutter, her heart in her mouth. She had not thought that my lady would remember. Or perhaps she had changed her

mind. "Oh, but," she stammered, "I don't think that——"

"It's her ladyship's orders, miss. And I am to bring Lady Ann's skirt if you say yes."

"Oh!" Rachel replied in a small voice. "Very well, Priscilla. I will get ready."

"I'll put out the skirt, miss. And please, Mr. Coker will be waiting in the stable court."

"And, by gum, what fun!" Ann cried, tossing up a book and catching it again. "I'll bet you'll get a fall! Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall! Humpty Dumpty had a great fall!" And chanting this, which she thought a fine piece of wit, she flew in great glee to summon Bodmin to witness the disaster.

Rachel would gladly have shunned the ordeal, but she dared not slight Lady Ellingham's kindness, and when she was ready—and very awkward she felt in her unwonted garb—she crept down the stairs, hiding her tremors as well as she could. Alas! she found Ann and her brother already on the scene, dancing up and down in their eagerness, and in the background a group of grinning men and maids peeping from the back-offices.

. But Coker, a shrewd person who drew his own conclusions, had foreseen this, and instead of mounting her from the stable-block he led her outside and drew up the pony beside a handy log. "Now, miss, don't you be afraid," he said comfortably. "The old pony will carry you like an arm-chair. Keep your knee in the crook and you can't fall, and your hands down, and look square before you. I'll shorten the stirrup a hole and you'll sit the straighter. Eyes to the front, that's the secret of ladies' riding, and you'll make no sore backs. Now I'll lead her on, and all you have to do is to sit straight. Old Jessie knows as well as you do that you're new to it, and she'll take as much care of you as a nurse of a babby! There! Now I'll let her go and you walk her down the avenue.

Don't hold her head, just feel her mouth and keep your hands down. That's it! Now, my lord," as he turned on Bodmin, "have done, if you please! None of your tricks, or I'll tell the Earl! I will as sure as I am here!"

He let her do no more than walk that day, and in half an hour Rachel had overcome the worst of her fears. She felt at home in the saddle and could venture to look about her. She alighted with a sense of achievement and a gallant determination to do more another day. And the next time she trotted a hundred yards with Coker running beside her and crying, "Lift yourself, miss! Lift yourself! That's it! Don't hang by her mouth! That's it! Now eyes to the front! Eyes to the front! Well done, old gal!" he added, addressing the pony. "I'm blest if you are not an arm-chair!"

He was a judicious teacher, and if she was not a dashing learner and had more fears to conquer than those she betrayed, she was determined to overcome them; for she foresaw that in another situation the ability to ride might be a valuable asset. And Coker took pains with her, as Tom in an injudicious moment ventured to remark. He got a flea in his ear. "Do you go and strap the chestnut!" snapped the stud-groom. "And see you do it or I'll strap you. I know what I'm about, my lad, if you don't." For Coker was prudent and had not given thought to that taking out of Medea for nothing.

So within ten days Rachel, enjoying the delicious sensation of a canter, tasted the real joys of riding, and bitten by it, was promoted at the end of a fortnight to ride out with her pupil. True, Ann complained bitterly of the old pony's sluggish pace and by turns patronized her companion and tickled her companion's mount. But Rachel returned flushed with triumph. As it happened, they fell in a hundred yards from the house with the men, who had been out

rabbiting, and her colour and bright eyes gave her the additional attraction that she needed. My lord himself lifted her down amid a shower of laughing compliments that made her feel almost one of themselves. How kind he was, and how pleasant! He was, indeed, so kind that it occurred to him to ride out with them himself, and more than once he did so, criticized her seat and her hands, and flattered himself that he was finishing her education.

But of course this made talk in the house. The grooms, viewing the matter professionally, went no further than to decide that she would make a rider—in time. And Coker accepted her half-crown and a grateful smile as if the former had been a guinea. But the housemaids tossed their heads—things were come to a pretty pass with governesses riding out and his lordship playing riding-master! And the footmen winked and said that she had a well-turned leg—at which the kitchenmaids giggled.

Mrs. Jemmett said little, but perhaps thought the more. And the butler said as good as nothing. But presently one was found to say something—and something to the purpose.

CHAPTER XXXI

THE FLOOD-GATES RAISED

LADY ELLINGHAM was knitting her brows over the housekeeper's books, when the door opened and her friend came in. Charlotte did not move at once to the table. She paused before a mirror and languidly straightened her hat; not because her appearance was anything to her at the moment, but because, as my lady might have seen had she looked up and marked the glint in her visitor's eye, the girl needed a minute in which to compose herself. In the end Charlotte took off her hat and with a pettish gesture flung it on the table.

"I hate that hat!" she said.

My lady laid down her pen. She looked up. "What is the matter with it?" she asked.

"It is too large and too flowery and too—oh, too everything. I wish," Charlotte continued, dropping into the nearest chair, "I had your easy nature, Kitty! Nothing ever puts you out, I declare."

Lady Ellingham suppressed a sigh. "I don't know that," she replied patiently. "Perhaps it is only that I don't show it as quickly as you do, Charlotte."

"No! Nor as openly! Well, perhaps it is that. Anyway," she decided, frowning at the offending hat, "it is a hideous thing!"

"Certainly I have seen you in one that I liked better."

"I hope so. I shall give it to my maid when I leave to-morrow. No, I shan't! Or I shall be seeing it

every day, and I hate it!" Then with a yawn, "How long do you stay here, Kitty?"

"At the Folly?"

"Yes."

"Well I——" my lady hesitated. "To tell you the truth, I don't really know. I am uncertain at present."

Charlotte sat up in well-simulated surprise. "But won't you be dreadfully lonely here—with only the children? When is Lord Ellingham leaving?"

"He has not said." Lady Ellingham's tone was cold. Between friends certain things come to be taken for granted, but my lady had never invited discussion upon them, and she did not mean to do so now.

She reckoned, however, without her guest. Charlotte had her reasons for trespassing on the forbidden ground, and she was not going to be warned off. "Hasn't he said?" she rejoined. "You know Bobbie goes with us to-morrow?"

"Yes, I understand so."

"And," after a long pause, "it is a bit unusual, Kitty, isn't it?"

The Countess coloured, but she strove to maintain her reserve. "Perhaps it is," she said carelessly. "He is not fond of the country, and, as you know, he seldom does stay here long—unless we have company."

The girl saw her opportunity and took it resolutely. "Then," she said, "what keeps him here now?"

My lady looked steadily at her. A little pink in her cheeks betrayed her displeasure. But before she could speak, Charlotte leapt the gap and came to the point with a rush. "I tell you what it is, Kitty," she said. "You ought not to keep that girl here."

"Who do you——"

"Oh, you know whom I mean, quite well." The young lady's eyes gleamed with spite. "Your Miss South, to be sure! Who else? If you do, depend

upon it you will repent it, Kitty. She's a minx, and the worst kind of minx, a sly, demure one! You've brought her too much forward, my dear, and she's deceiving you! She's throwing dust in your eyes every day! You need only go as far as the window at the end of the corridor, the one that looks on the stable court, and if they are there still—as they were five minutes ago—you will know what I know! And what," she added viciously, "I expect that everyone in the house except you knows already!"

Lady Ellingham had not foreseen speech of this plainness. But she had learned to control herself, she had had indeed only too much reason to learn the lesson, and she continued to look steadily at her companion. "My dear Charlotte," she said gravely, "it is you who deceive yourself. You don't like the girl—I don't know why, but I can guess." This was a little feline stab. "And, believe me, whether you have good reason or not for the feeling, it leads your fancy astray. I have no doubt, indeed I have good ground to know that, whatever you have seen, it means nothing. It is quite harmless."

"And you are not going——"

"To the corridor window?" with a faint smile. "Foolish girl! No, of course not. Why should I?" She took up her pen. "I have something better to do, my dear. I know Miss South pretty well by this time—and her affairs. And I have these books to do."

The smile that accompanied the careless words was more than Charlotte in her excitement could bear. She sprang to her feet, her eyes sparkling. She snatched up her hat. "I don't believe you care!" she said, reckless of consequences, and casting delicacy to the winds. "I don't believe that you have an ounce of feeling in you! You are a monster, Kitty! A monster! To see this going on and to do nothing! I wouldn't be you for a—for a fortune! Oh, I've

no patience with you! You are blind! Blind!"

"My dear," my lady replied, and she ticked off an item in the book with care. "Don't be silly! You excite yourself about nothing!"

But, "You're a monster!" Charlotte repeated, tears of vexation in her eyes. And she flung out of the room.

Lady Ellingham, her eyes on the book, added up a column of pence and—for women can do two things at once—added it correctly. "I made a mistake once and I won't make it again," her thoughts ran. "I won't lower myself. He is at least a gentleman." She reckoned up the shillings, doing a sum on her fingers, then the pounds. She initialled the total. "No, I am sure he would not," she thought. "And there is George too. She does not know about George."

The corridor window—and that spiteful girl watching to see if she would go to it? Not for her life! But she no longer saw the figures in the book. She stared at them mechanically, and her face was pale and thoughtful. If there were any truth in this, what was she to believe? Who was she to trust if those candid eyes and baby looks did but mark the guile that this jealous girl denounced? If this were true, true at all, to what depths of contempt and degradation was she falling? Nay, to what a depth had she fallen already, if such a thing was believed by those about her, if, thinking themselves in the disgraceful secret, they whispered behind her back, smiled in wonder at her fatuity, her blindness, her weakness?

No grounds! No, certainly no grounds in this case. But then he had deceived her again and again. She had known it, had long known it, and had wrapped herself in her pride and framed her life and steeled her looks to repel pity. Pity? Whatever happened she had told herself that she would escape that. But hitherto he had at least kept his infidelities out of her sight, he had not paraded them before her. He had had so much respect for her. But if this were so—in

her own home, with her own dependant? That were too much, and she would not bear it! No, never, never! She examined with minuteness the nib of her pen, saw that she had by some unconscious pressure split it, and looked about for her penknife. But her hand shook as she took up the knife, and she laid it down again, her face drawn with pain.

The corridor window? She rose and rang the bell. When the man came, she did not raise her eyes. "Is Lady Ann riding to-day?"

"Yes, my lady, they've just gone."

"I wanted her to mend a pen. I've spoiled this one. Get me a new one from the library."

So that temptation was out of her way! When the pen came she returned with a wrench to the books and finished them, and spoke to Mrs. Jemmett about them. And at lunch, a slight meal in those days, she wore her usual placid face, and as usual spoke little. There was some talk of George; he had sailed from Portsmouth with Lord Nelson's squadron, he had been signalled in the Downs, and should by this time have joined Admiral Parker's fleet in Yarmouth Roads. Probably there would be a letter from him in a day or two—but then his letters were all the same—they never contained much beyond the praises of the *Polyphemus* and his officers—never were such good fellows!—and of his "people"—no ship's company ever had such stout hearts! The party laughed at his enthusiasm, but there was an undernote of tenderness in the laughter. Soon, very soon—my lord noted that the wind was westerly—there might be news, and it would doubtless be good news for England, for was not Lord Nelson there? But the Danes were stubborn fellows, and it might be sad news for some! No one confessed to anxiety—but!

Apparently, then, Charlotte Froyle's warning had fallen on barren ground, and the girl, vexed with herself, was sorry that she had spoken. Apparently she

had betrayed her feelings, and betrayed them for nothing. However, in her saner senses she was too prudent to reopen the subject or press the matter further; and a truce of platitudes reigned between her and her hostess. And the next day, with much parade and bustle at the last, with maid and valets and grooms and the rest, the visitors left in a body, the two friends parting with the usual kisses and amenities—which deceived neither.

But when the last farewells had been waved from the doorway and the knot of servants had dispersed, a stillness fell upon the house that gave my lady only too much time to think. Maids sauntered from room to room collecting linen, the footmen gaped as they counted the plate, the men who swept the stable court swept lazily. Mrs. Jemmett sat before her fire, her hands in her lap, Bowles yawned over the day before yesterday's *Post*.

And my lady, whether she would or no, pondered. She saw my lord dawdle listlessly by the windows, his hands in his pockets, and she looked at the clock. It was half-past eleven, and Ann rode at twelve. And the day was fine, she would be sure to ride. Was my lord lingering here for that? Were his thoughts also occupied with that? Or what had he in his head? Why, above all and before all—it was this which troubled her most—was he staying at Queen's Folly? Why had he dropped no hint of departure, he who for the past three years had not spent three days at a time alone with her, who hated dullness like the devil and had misspent his life in the avoidance of it? The shooting was over, the hunting was indifferent, why—why was he staying?

Alas! temptations recur, and with added strength. To-day my lady had no books to check and her work fell from her hands. She looked again at the clock; it wanted but ten minutes of twelve. And the corridor window was near, so near. But no, she would not

stoop to play the spy. Yet, in justice to him and after what had been said—might it not be her duty to assure herself that all was right—that in this, at any rate, that spiteful girl had slandered him? How many misunderstandings, how much unhappiness it might avert were she sure! Were she sure!

And the girl, she reflected. Perhaps she owed it to the girl, owed it to her to expel once and for all that shadowy distrust, that haunting suspicion, that had been again and again exorcised, but only and always to reappear. George? True, there was George, but it was all on his side, and what assurance did it give of the girl's good behaviour? She had been easy, almost light, to win in one case—and there was much in that case my lady misliked. She might not have heard all the truth about that—even now.

The clock's silvery chime told her that it was noon. She rose, and sat down again, took up her work and thrust in the needle. No, she would not lower herself! To do so were to let fall that mask of indifference which she had worn so long—so long that it almost deceived herself—that mask which, if it had not saved her from pain, had at least shielded her from pity.

No! But with her mind made up, and with the very word on her lips, she dropped her work, she rose and moved towards the door. She paused with her hand on it. It was hateful, it was degrading to spy on him. Hateful, hateful! But in her own house, with her own dependant! For the girl's sake, for George's sake, if for nothing else, she ought to do it. For why 'was he stopping? Why was he stopping—ah, if she only knew that!—if not for this? She ought to know.

She opened the door and with a firm step she walked down the wide corridor, flanked here by an old Bareilly trunk or a cedar chest bound with silver, there by a low bookcase surmounted by Buddhas and Chinese dragons. The servants had no business to be on that

floor at that hour and there was no one to overlook her. She moved slowly yet with a beating heart to the far window that looked on the stable court. Looking through it, she was as one who gazed from a stage box into the pit of a theatre, so plain to her was all that passed below.

She had hardly reached her goal when she stifled an exclamation. Not that she saw what she had come to see and feared to see. The governess was there, indeed, but in the background. She was standing beside the horse-block, somewhat apart, and holding Ann by the hand. And she looked frightened. In front of the two and nearer the window at which Lady Ellingham stood were a number of men, Lord Ellingham, Coker, Tom, three or four stablemen. But they too were only spectators. The centre of all was Bodmin. He was the performer. He was bestriding a pony—a new one the Countess fancied; and the pony was backing and kicking, while its rider strove with blows and excited cries to force it towards the gateway and out of the court.

Alarmed for the boy, Lady Ellingham nearly gave way to her first impulse and betrayed her presence. She raised her hand to tap on the window. But she had been well trained, she knew that interference would vex my lord, and though her fears cried out against the laughing indifference with which he watched the struggle, she held her hand, albeit with every plunge of the restive pony she expected the boy to be unseated.

But though he was nearly thrown off more than once, Bodmin clung to his saddle, and with a boy's disregard of danger continued to strike and spur the pony. And presently, with a final kick which tossed its rider on to its neck, the beast gave way, dropped its head, and, boring and pulling, plunged away through the gateway. The men cheered the rider and ran to the entrance to follow his course, but quickly came

back in a body, laughing and talking, and my lady could see that Ellingham was pleased. She breathed again and the colour which had ebbed from her face —she never had much—returned.

If she had gone then ! But though she now lingered in idle curiosity rather than of set purpose, she remained. She saw the ladies' horses led out, she saw Ann mount from the block and move about the court curveting and showing off. Then it was Rachel's turn, and Lady Ellingham frowned as she noticed that my lord would not let the governess mount from the block but was bent on putting her up himself. The girl seemed to demur with modesty, but he insisted, took her foot, and was evidently instructing her to spring at a signal. The men in the background smirked—or was it my lady's fancy ?—at one another. And a moment later—the girl was in the saddle now —the watcher caught her breath and stepped back with a half-stifled cry of pain.

This time it was from that which she had feared to see and had come to see that she recoiled. He was showing the girl—shameless thing, sitting there for all to see !—how to hold the reins. He took them from her hands, disentangled them and put them again between her fingers ; leaning against her knees and the pony's shoulder, as he did it. But it was not that, not that alone, intimate as the action was and eloquent as it seemed to the Countess, that sent a flame of passion, such passion as she thought she had long outlived, through Lady Ellingham's veins. It was the laughing upward look that Ellingham shot at the girl, as he rallied her on her clumsiness, it was the frank boyish smile that she had once known so well and that years ago had lured her own heart from her, it was that look and that smile, now aimed at another, that drove my lady back from the window and sent her hand to her side.

And—and oh, this was too much ! They were

leading out his horse, and he was going with them! He was going with them, he who hardly ever rode with Ann, with his own daughter! With jealous eyes the Countess watched them pass through the gates, Ann leading, my lord riding by the governess's side, and leaning towards her, handling her reins again, giving her another lesson as they paced along.

She did not stay to reason. To know is one thing, to see is another; and on what she had seen the suspicions that Charlotte Froyle had insinuated placed, and could only place, in a jealous woman's view, one colour. In a moment the barriers that pride and self-respect had raised, and that for years had dammed back the flood of feeling, gave way, and with a violence proportioned to the stress that she had so long put upon herself, the bitter waters flowed forth and carried all away. The cold, sedate spectator whose indifference had seemed monstrous to Charlotte became in a twinkling a jealous, raging woman, insulted in her home, outraged in her tenderest point, tried at last beyond bearing—a fury. With burning cheeks and heaving breast she swept back to her room, and there behind a locked door paced to and fro, venting in broken stormy words the resentment that whirled her away.

Even so, habit and pride might in time have restored her to herself. Unfortunately jealousy would not let her rest, it drove her to action, and by and by she had a natural but an unhappy thought. She would see them return. She flew to another room, she waited and watched, and at last she saw them ride in. And again the children were together in front, and my lord was at the girl's bridle-rein. He was talking to her, his eyes on her face, bending towards her while he rubbed his riding-crop across the pony's hogged mane. He pointed to the girl's stirrup, and with his boyish smile said something—something about the size of her foot, the suspicious woman fancied.

The sight and that smile, so gay, so frank, so well remembered—ay, remembered many a time with many a pang !—robbed my lady of the last shred of self-mastery. When the two came into the hall, and unluckily they came in alone by the side door, the children lingering behind to give sugar to their ponies, she met them, her face colourless, her eyes shining. She pointed an accusing finger at the amazed Rachel. "That girl must go ! " she said with restrained passion. "She must go to-day ! To-day ! She shall not stay in this house another night—if it be not already too late ! Shameless, insolent girl, go ! Go to your room ! "

My lord, if he did not look guilty, looked most certainly confounded. "What the devil is this ? " he exclaimed in amazement. While Rachel, stricken dumb, and the colour driven from her face by the shock, stared in dismay.

CHAPTER XXXII

A CLIMAX

"WHAT the devil is this?" my lord repeated, and now there was as much anger as amazement in his tone—anger, for here at any rate he was innocent; amazement, for so far his worst offences had provoked his wife to no more than a cold and haughty disdain, the contempt of one who held herself above injury. "Have you gone mad, Kitty?"

"No," my lady retorted with a passion equal to his. "I am sane at last. I see things as they are! I am no longer deceived! Let that girl," and again she raised her hand and pointed to the stairs, "that shameless, deceitful girl, take herself out of my sight before I sully my lips by saying what she is!"

"By G—d, but I think you are mad!" my lord repeated. "What in heaven's name has come to you? What has happened?"

"Happened?" Her voice rose a tone. "Have I not eyes to see? Am I blind, that you think my patience will last for ever? That it has no bottom, no end, sir? Let that girl go, and let her not dare to——"

She broke off. The children had burst in, in all the riot and fullness of their young life, into the hall. There, however, and in a moment, they felt the chill; they saw that something was wrong, and their voices died down. The Countess pointed to the stairs. "Go! Go!" she said, and her tone was so stern that even

Ann did not venture to argue. "You are not wanted here!" she added, and stricken dumb, bending to the storm, the two stole silently across the room and up the stairs.

But in one way the interruption served. It had given Rachel time to collect her senses, and courage to take her part. "I do not know, Lady Ellingham, what you mean," she said, her voice quivering with indignation, "nor what I have done to offend you. But if I am to understand——"

"Miserable girl!" my lady cried. "Do not bandy words with me! Do not dare! You are dismissed—this hour, this minute! Begone! Pack your things and leave the house!"

"By G—d!" my lord interposed—he was now boiling with indignation. "You are mad! You must be mad!"

But Rachel replied as if he had not spoken. "Then," she said, outwardly calm, but tingling in every nerve, "I must have a reason. I cannot be treated in this way. I cannot be sent away, Lady Ellingham, and no reason given. No, I will not go," she continued firmly, "on such terms. I have a right——"

"Right? " Lady Ellingham retorted in an indescribable tone. "You? You dare——" And then again there was an interruption. It was the luncheon hour; one of the men put in his head on his way to the gong. Lady Ellingham dismissed him by a gesture, but the break did something to restore her to reason. "I will see you in the library," she said haughtily, and she turned and led the way into that room. The two followed. My lord closed the door.

"Now, if you please," he said, before Lady Ellingham could speak—and it seemed as if they had changed places, for it was he who was now cold and hard—"we will have the facts. You have spoken to this young lady in such a way that nothing else will serve. I will have no more beating about the

bush. Say at once, if you please, of what you accuse her."

The Countess's eyes sparkled with anger. "You ask me? You?"

"I do," he replied. "And I must have an answer. It is I who in the last instance am responsible for this house, and what happens in it. Of what do you accuse Miss South?"

There are things which it is difficult to put into words, and for a moment words failed the jealous woman. Then, "You know very well," she said. But she was aware that she was weakening.

"That will not do," he rejoined—and he looked at her in a way that he had never looked at her before. Every trace of smiling youth, of easy good-humour, of tacit apology, was gone from his face, leaving it hard, stern, severe. On the heath at Newmarket, perhaps, or over the cards at White's or the Cocoa-Tree, men had seen him with that face, but his wife never. "You have gone too far to be silent now. You must put your accusation into words."

Lady Ellingham's breast rose stormily, but she did not refuse the challenge. "She is intriguing with you!" she said. "Vilely, wickedly intriguing with you—under my roof! I have borne much—you alone know, sir, how much I have borne and kept silence! To what infidelities I have been blind, what insults I have declined to see! But this, this"—her voice trembled—"I will not bear! My daughter's governess! In my own house! If I bear this I lower myself to the vilest of women. I am a partner in my own shame!"

"There is not a word of truth in it," my lord declared, so coldly, so dispassionately that it shook even her conviction. "Not a syllable!"

"And you would have me believe——"

"I would have you believe," he replied sternly, "what I say."

"That you have never—never——" she stammered, her voice almost failing her, "betrayed me? Never been unfaithful to me?"

"I did not say that. That is not the question here."

"Please do not say more!" It was Rachel who interposed, and her voice was almost as cold and dry as my lord's. "I understand now, and I do not wish to learn more, or to defend myself. Lady Ellingham has insulted me by suspicions—suspicions that are unjust as they are baseless. She has insulted me grossly," she continued, her voice trembling, "and I will certainly go to-day—within the hour if it be possible. I should be wrong to stay an hour under the protection of one who can think such things of me, and can condemn me unheard."

But, "No," my lord said with decision. "You shall not go! You have done nothing!"

"But I must go," Rachel insisted with spirit. "I am innocent of even the thought of harm, but I cannot remain in a house in which, Lord Ellingham, I am open to such charges."

"You are the best judge of that," the Countess retorted. She had wonderfully changed her tone, however—she spoke almost sullenly.

"I am. And I must judge for myself—and protect myself," Rachel declared, and she turned to the door, her head high. But she was so shaken that she could hardly walk.

Lord Ellingham moved as if he would have intercepted her, but apparently he thought better of it. Instead he opened the door, and when she had passed out, he closed it after her. He walked to one of the windows and stood looking through it, his back to his wife. She remained standing beside a table, feverishly tapping its surface with her fingers. But the passion had died out of her face, and had left it white and weary. For if she did not believe Rachel, at any rate she had begun to doubt. And she saw that, if she

had made a mistake, then she had made a terrible mistake. She had stripped herself of her pride and her self-respect, and for nothing! She had lost all, all that remained to her. It was that thought that was beginning to press upon her—that and the silence in the room.

At last he turned. "You have been guilty," he said calmly but gravely, "of a great, a very great injustice, Kitty. Upon what grounds you have acted, what fancied grounds, for real ones there are none, I cannot say. I cannot even imagine."

"You have given me enough!" she cried.

"Not in this case."

"But I have seen—I have seen with my own eyes."

"What?"

"I saw you ride out with her, saw you ride back with her! Ah!" she added with a gesture of pain, as the remembrance returned to her. "But I have seen enough!"

"You saw," he replied sternly, "nothing that was not innocent, nothing that a candid mind could misinterpret. I will swear to that."

"You would have me believe that you have never wronged me?"

"Have I said that?" It was he who was scornful now, and though he waited for an answer she did not answer. "Have I ever denied that you had wrongs?" he continued. "That I was in fault? Is it not for that reason that we live as we do?"

"And if——" she made a desperate clutch at the heat that had inspired her five minutes before—"if with one, why not with another? Why have you stayed here? Why are you here now? You never stayed before! Why are you staying now?" With all her power she drove home the question. "What is your attraction! It is not I, God knows! Then, is it not plain what it is? Do not even the servants see it, and smile and nudge one another when you—when you

give your riding lessons? Riding lessons to your daughter's governess? Do you think I am blind?"

"In this matter you are blind," he rejoined. "And if with one, why not with another? You have said yourself why, and if you do not see the difference I do. This girl in my daughter's governess. And why do I stay here?" For the first time a trace of feeling broke the cold severity of his tone. "I will tell you, madam, though I had not meant to tell you yet, nor God knows in these circumstances. I expected the question, but I intended to wait until it was—heaven help me!—more kindly put—put to me in some more timely moment! However, it has been put, and I will answer it. I stayed partly because, though you may hardly credit it, and may not credit it, I have grown, if it be but a little, older and wiser. And partly because one who is a better man than I has talked to me. Ann is growing up and Bodmin will soon be more than a boy, and before they learn things, I thought—I dreamt perhaps"—he hesitated and stumbled—"that we might, if you willed it, and were it only for their sakes—place things on a better footing between us! Because a man has played the fool—and I was very young, as were you, when we married—it is not necessary that he should go on playing it. And because he has not always valued what he has, it does not follow that when his eyes are opened he may not regret what he has lost. Until to-day I have always thought that you still preserved some feeling for me, and for the children's sake I fancied—I knew you were generous——"

"No, weak!" She was still tapping softly on the table, she still showed an unchanged front. But there was such pain in her averted eyes, such anguish in her heart, so terrible a sense of an opportunity, an incredible, unhoped-for opportunity, lost—lost in this unhappy hour—that had he but once met her eyes, she must have broken down.

But he took her as he saw her, and, "Proud, at any

rate," he rejoined. "For I have never thought you deceived, and I have given you credit for your attitude —and perhaps admired it." He stopped and seemed at a loss. Then, "At any rate, that is why—I have stayed here. I dare say I was a fool."

"Or you thought me one!" She longed to alter her tone, but she could not, she could not.

And with that he too grew harder. "In this most unfortunate matter you have been one. You have forgotten yourself, and forgotten also that, if I am not a good man—and to you I have not been without fault—I have at least some scruples."

"The fault is yours," she retorted. She spoke sullenly, for she could not bend her pride. But in truth she was dying to surrender, and if he had observed her closely, he would have seen that she was trembling in every limb. "It is not your place to teach the governess to ride, to handle her reins, to ride beside her, to put her up"—with reviving indignation—"with your own hands! It is unbecoming, it is unfitting, sir. You cannot deny it."

He did not. He was silent, standing grave and thoughtful at some distance from her. And when after a pause he spoke he surprised her. "Has it ever occurred to you," he said, "that George has some notion of making this girl his wife?"

She was startled. In her jealousy she had forgotten that aspect of the case, and, for my lord, she had supposed him to be ignorant of it. Now it rose before her, and pricked her conscience. "Did he tell you so?" she asked.

"No, but he has said enough to make me suspect it. I supposed that you might be in his confidence—if you are not, and I am mistaken, and certainly I hope that I am, for it would be a *mésalliance*, it alters the position. But if it be so, is it so unfitting that she should learn to ride—it was your suggestion, was it not? Or so unfitting that I should teach her?"

She passed a hand across her brow, and, alas, reason had regained its seat, and wretched, most wretched, she wondered what madness had seized her. How—how had she come to forget George, and George's last request and her promise to him to keep the girl with her? But that—oh, how small a thing was that! She could have borne that! She could have put that right. What she could not bear was the thought that she had cast away her long-cherished reserve and trampled her pride in the dust—for nothing! That she had flung all away in a moment, and with all, her happiness! Oh, she had indeed, indeed humbled herself! Now, if she would not make the loss final and irreparable, if she would clutch even at this last moment at hope, she must humble herself to the ground. And at length, "What do you wish me to do?" she asked.

But his anger was still hot. He thought her sullen and fixed in her injustice. "Nothing!" he said, and the dull word rang a knell in her ears, drowning that faint murmur of joybells that had for a moment rung in the depths of her desolate heart. "I do not wish you to do anything."

She forced herself to stoop lower. "If you wish," she said, "I will go to her, and—and ask her to remain."

But he would not meet her. "It is for you to do what you think right," he said.

She winced. "You are hard," she murmured; and indeed this was a side of him that she had never known. With all his faults he had ever been courteous, gentle, good-tempered with her.

"It is my house and I am responsible," he rejoined. "I think you have forgotten that. I might order, but I do not order. I leave it to you to do what you think is right." He took out his watch—he seemed to say, "You have so many minutes—I allow you so much—if you do not——" His look, his tone, his bearing, all were strange to her, harsh, compelling.

She sighed. At last, "I will go to her," she said.

He opened the door for her, his watch still in his hand.

Left alone, he began to walk up and down the room. From time to time he stood, took a trifle from a table and laid it down again, his thoughts elsewhere. Ten minutes passed. The door opened, and Lady Ellingham came in.

"She will not stop," she said in a dull voice.

"Have you——"

"I have asked her pardon." A red spot burned in each of my lady's cheeks.

He was still stern, unforgiving. "The girl must not go," he said.

"But I have said all that I——" She broke off. "Very well," she said with lowered eyes. "I will try again." She left the room.

He returned to his pacing, until the door opened anew. "She will remain until to-morrow," my lady announced in a lifeless tone. "She will make some excuse for leaving. I can do no more. Indeed, I cannot."

He rang the bell. "Then we will go to lunch," he said. And she saw that she was still unforgiven. "It is late." Coldly and formally he opened the door and followed her out.

But, ah, the silence of that meal! It fell drop by drop on my lady's heart, quenching with its chill the trembling flame of hope that had sprung up, damping down the tiny spark that had begun to glow, leaving all cold, lifeless, desolate—more lifeless, more desolate, more hopeless than before. The children, warned of trouble, stole to their places and stayed their chatter. Even Ann, daunted for once, sat humped and on guard, stealing shrewd glances from under the penthouse of her black locks and storing her mind with reflections which she would retail later. "Crikey, but there has been a rumpus!" was the gist of them. The men waited with servile care, went to and fro soft-footed,

while Bowles, standing impassive behind his mistress's chair—but what Bowles thought Mrs. Jemmett learned over a thimbleful of Garland's port an hour later.

"I'm afraid it's serious this time, ma'am," he said, shaking his head. "It won't surprise me if it's a break-up. And to think that two like you and me, Mrs. Jemmett, should be shivering in their places for such a chit as that. Oh, woman, woman, what a sight of harm you do!"

"And here was I," Mrs. Jemmett reflected sagely, "thinking all the time as it was the Captain!"

"A daughter of mischief, ma'am, that's what she be! There's no other name for her."

"And his lordship seemed put out, did he, Bowles?"

"Tragic, ma'am, tragic! A nether millstone. And her ladyship never looked off her plate and ate no more than a sparrow. She's sorted him for once, I wager. I fear, I fear it'll be a separation this time, Mrs. J."

"Well, it's no more than he's earned!" the housekeeper sighed. "I'd like to sort him myself. As for that minx—— Well?" she asked sharply. "What now?"

Priscilla had put in her head. "If you please, Mrs. Jemmett, can Miss South have some string?"

"String?" the housekeeper said ungraciously. "What does she want with string?"

"If you please, ma'am, she's packing and——"

"Packing?" Very, very nearly did Mrs. Jemmett give away to an inferior that a thing was passing in that house of which she was ignorant. But she was a woman of resource and she saved herself. "Of course she is! But what does she want with string?" she rejoined.

"She's broke a strap and——"

Grudgingly the housekeeper gave out the string, and saw the door close on the underling. Then, "Wish she may hang herself with it!" she said. "Well, she've brought her pigs to a pretty market! However,

you may make yourself easy now. My lady's won, seemingly."

"And I'm thankful," the butler agreed. "Yet I know it's weak, but she'd a way with her, that girl—I could almost find it in my heart to be sorry for her."

"Well, I never, Bowles! And it is but a minute since you were calling her a daughter of mischief and heaven knows what!"

The butler sighed. "I couldn't bear the thought we might be parted, ma'am."

"It's news to me we were ever joined!" Mrs. Jemmett answered tartly, her colour rising. She looked at the clock and bustled to her feet. "There! I've my work to do, if you've none. I can't stay gossiping here all day."

"You're hard, ma'am, hard," Bowles pleaded.

"I suppose I've not a way with me!" said Mrs. Jemmett.

CHAPTER XXXIII

IN THE STABLE COURT

RACHEL did not doubt that she was wise to go. She might have made out a case for staying; she might have argued with some plausibility that in resisting my lady's overtures to remain she was yielding to a resentment natural but short-sighted. And doubtless that was the light in which Lady Ellingham must view her action. But Rachel knew better, and though she had plenty of leisure in which to weigh the matter, she never doubted what course she ought to take.

But she did regret, and very sorely, the necessity that was laid upon her. The schoolroom which had once seemed so bare and unhomelike now stretched friendly arms to her. The shabby old globe and the ink-stained table which she had often eyed with distaste now seemed to be things which she could not leave without pain. It was a harbour of refuge that she was quitting, dear if dull, and if lonely, safe; and more than once she asked herself for what she was exchanging it. If she would not be a burden on her mother's slender resources, she must quickly find another situation; and that found she must face the chill of new surroundings, the reluctant welcome, the curious looks of strangers. That would be, that must be, if she went, her fate.

It was all loss, though she was determined to go, and did not falter. But amid her regrets, that which rose up at once most bitter and most sweet was the thought of one who, she felt sure, had he been at the

Folly, would not have let her suffer injustice. Captain Dunstan had helped her in worse straits, and he would have helped her in this strait. Of that she was certain, not asking herself what he could have done more than my lord had done, or how he would have intervened ; but simply and blindly assured that before the Captain all difficulties would have vanished and that in some way he would have served her and saved her.

But that certainty was in truth the very thing that determined Rachel. She was no longer the simple girl that she had been, and she understood what this feeling meant ; and the discovery, late made, frightened as much as it shamed her. It was not only that between her and her benefactor, between her and his people, there yawned a wide gulf, sloping indeed on his side but a fatal precipice on hers—that peril Lady Ellingham had made abundantly clear to her ; but between her and him there lay also her past weakness, her stupendous folly, her whole history since he had known her—memories and a history that burned her face with shame. To lose her heart, to misplace her affections, twice in a twelvemonth ! Oh, it was indeed time, it was indeed well that she should go and learn wisdom in another place.

For dimly, yet with a true instinct, Rachel saw that if she stayed, unhappiness worse than that which she now suffered awaited her. And this, though she was even now very wretched, very sad as she sat with her few possessions packed and the schoolroom's friendly face making dumb appeal to her. And Ann's farewell, the child's naïve " Oh, you silly old thing, why do you go ? " even her impulsive hug, though it meant much from Ann, whose nature, hard as nails, made any show of affection a tribute, was too casual, too careless to bring comfort to a heart that hungered for some warmer, some more human farewell.

" But I am only the governess ! " she thought. " And—and no one cares now he is gone ! In a month

there will be another, and I shall be forgotten!"

And she had still an hour to wait. She was leaving an hour before noon.

In truth, had she known it, the girl was filling a far larger place in the thoughts of the house than she imagined. Hidden away in her solitude, she was troubling the peace of two persons. My lord would in any case have found it difficult to ignore one who had worked up so tragic a crisis between him and his wife; but he was further oppressed by the sense that the girl was being wronged. He was young enough and, to do him justice, generous enough to be heated by this; and his indignation on his own account—for no man resents a baseless accusation so fiercely as he who has been guilty elsewhere—was not lessened by the fact that the sufferer was a woman and young. He was still very far from forgiving his wife; even a night had not cooled him to that point, and having taken breakfast in forbidding silence, he had wandered forth to pervade the stables, finding fault where no fault was and a terror to grooms and stablemen. No horse was to-day shod to his liking, the chestnut was too fine, Medea's legs should have been bandaged, the bay's hocks were as big as bedposts, the oats were d—d rubbish! Even Coker, usually master in his own domain, wilted before him. He wandered in and out, a circling thunder-cloud, and all who could escape slid round corners. Bodmin, approaching in an unwary hour, was styled an untidy young cub and sent back to the house to button his gaiters.

But if my lord was restless and moody, his discontent having its source deeper than the governess's matter, though he laid it on that, my lady was still more unhappy. For she knew what she wanted. She knew what hope had in a most unlooked-for hour sprung up from the barren soil and she knew by what act of folly, of incredible folly, she had nipped the shoot!

She paced her room with parted lips and heaving breast, and found no rest. Her pride all fallen from her, she would have torn her tender flesh if by so doing she could have undone her act. If she had thought that by a further abasement, however humiliating, she could move that stubborn girl upstairs, who had in a moment of time grown into so formidable, so fatal an obstacle, she would not have spared herself. But she had taken Rachel's measure, she was certain that prayer would be futile, and she could only hope—but with a sinking, anguished heart—that when the girl was gone the breach, this new breach, might be healed.

Might be healed ? Ah, but how little satisfying was hope, when but for her own imbecility, her own mad act—in that light she saw it now !—she might at this moment have been happy, safe, assured, blest in the repentant tenderness, the returning passion of one who had been her maiden choice, and whom she had never ceased to love, even when he had been least faithful ! For he had never been as so many others in his case. He had never been harsh, brutal, ungenerous, even in his infidelities. He had only been unfaithful ; stabbing her to the heart indeed, and torturing that tender bosom, but never erasing from it the image of her first love. And how many, how many had tempted him ! Wicked, wicked women ! Theirs, theirs had been nine-tenths of the blame !

She paced the room torn by doubts, racked by fears, measuring his displeasure—and with all his faults he had never in the past shown displeasure to her. Rather had his bearing been that of one who mutely owned himself in fault, owned her perfection, pleaded only the force of circumstances and his own weakness. How intolerable then, if at this crisis, when his better angel and his sober years prevailed, she had wrecked all !

Her fevered eyes fell on the clock. It wanted twenty minutes of eleven. In twenty minutes it would be too

late to do anything. Should she, after all, make one last appeal to that wretched, hard-hearted girl—who held her fate in her hands? Or should she consult him of whom she had in a moment grown afraid? At the worst she might prove to him that she was anxious to comply with his wishes, that the fault did not lie with her. He had willed that she should humble herself and she had done it, and the tacit order had been dear to her. She pondered, and at last she rang the bell.

"When does Miss South start?" she asked.

"At eleven, my lady."

"From the side door?"

"No, my lady, from the stable court."

"Where is his lordship?"

"He was in the stables, but I believe he is at the front now."

She dismissed the man and went to her room; and anxiously before the mirror she twitched a curl this way, straightened a ribbon—this was no time, ah, no time to neglect herself! Then she snatched up a cloak and hat and traversed the passage and stairs to the great doors. Yes, there was the Earl, standing near the entrance gates, sombrely switching at the gravel with his cane. A few paces from him Ann was playing with a dog. My lady saw that she was in time, and with a quick-beating heart she went to him.

"If you wish it," she said with a new and touching humility, "I will speak to Miss South again, and beg her to stay. I do not think I shall succeed. I have said already all that it is possible to say. But I will try again—if it is your pleasure."

"Well—try then!" he said gloomily. "But wait a minute. There's the boy coming out."

He signed to her to stand aside as Bodmin rode out of the stable court. He was on the new pony and he waved his hand gaily as he passed. The cob was fresh, and bored and pulled at the bit, its stout haunches gathered under it, its eye wicked. But the boy, proud

of his new mount, and delighted with the chance of showing off before them, went by laughing and slapping his gaiter with his whip to prove his confidence.

My lady was not sorry to find an indifferent subject, and with a show of more anxiety than she felt, "Is that pony safe?" she asked.

My lord was not to be propitiated. "Safe? Good lord, yes!" he said. "A bit fresh."

"But should not someone"—she spoke timidly, for, alas, she was beginning to fear him!—"go with him?"

"Rubbish! The boy's not a molly-coddle!" His eye followed his heir with pride.

They watched the two sidle away along the turf beside the drive, the figures of horse and boy dwarfed by the walls of lofty trees that flanked the glade. Then they turned. My lord looked at his watch. "You had better meet her in the court," he said. "If you go through the house, you will miss her."

The stable clock struck as he spoke. From where they stood, by the outer gates, they could look through the inner gateway into the stable court and could see drawn up at a side door the carriage that awaited the governess. It was the hour of the servants' "elevens," and the men had gone in to their snack. There was no one in the court except the driver of the carriage, sitting on his box and now and again stroking one of the horses with the tail of his whip.

My lady moved towards the court. "You'll have to be quick," my lord called after her. "She is coming out, I think."

Lady Ellingham hastened her steps, and had covered a dozen yards or more when a gun-shot rang out; fired apparently at some distance. It was too common a sound at the Folly to alarm, and my lady did not turn. But before she had taken a second ten steps—though she walked quickly, in fear lest the chaise should move away—there came to her ears another sound—an ominous sound to experienced ears. It

was the rattle of galloping hoofs on a hard road, and my lady turned, and instinctively looked back in misgiving. The next moment my lord's voice rose. "Damnation!" he exclaimed. "That pony's off!" In a dozen strides he was beside my lady. "Take care!" he exclaimed and pushed her to the side; and even in that moment of alarm she recognized that his first thought was for her. "Look out, Kitty! He's coming this way—ah!" The last word was pitched in a different key, and of itself would have stricken her with terror, if she had had no eyes to see.

But she could see. The cob was coming towards them, hurtling down the drive at the top of its speed, its head between its knees. It was completely out of control and running away, making blindly for its stable. The boy was sitting it bravely, leaning back and dragging with all his small strength at the shortened reins, but to no purpose. And then, and almost in the same moment, the two—the poor mother as quickly as my lord—discerned the deadly peril that awaited their child. The stable door—their thoughts darted instinctively to it, for it was full in their sight, and scarce forty yards away—was open, and it was low in the brow—too low for the rider to pass through it, if the cob pursued its reckless course. And even as the peril declared itself, it was upon them. The pony thundered through the gates beside them, my lord with a stifled cry rushed to head it off. He was yards too late. The cob swerved, and passed him. It made at the same frenzied pace for the stable gateway. It swept through it in a flash.

"Throw yourself off!" my lord shouted. "Throw yourself off!"

But whether the boy heard the words or not—and the clatter of the galloping hoofs may have deafened him—he did not act, and the only person who could act, the man on the chaise, was hard put to it to control his horses, and had not the quickness of wit to switch

them across the frightened animal's path. Probably if he had had the thought, the notice was too short, for the court was crossed in a second. My lord uttered a strangled cry, my lady hid her face.

And then, with the gaping doorway no more than four or five lengths ahead of the runaway, a little slender figure sprang from behind the chaise, flung itself, as it seemed to my lord, full in the cob's way, caught, heaven knew how, some impossible rein, and in the tenth part of a second all, horse, boy and that little figure, came plunging and crashing to the ground and rolled to the base of the wall in a ghastly medley of upturned girths and gleaming irons. Such a sight on the kindly greensward or the gentle plough—who has not seen it with a qualm and held his breath? But on the hard ground of the court, with the merciless walls of the stables but a pace away! My lord ran, his face white as a woman's. My lady heard, looked, and shuddered. In a strength not her own she staggered after him. "Now God have mercy on us," she whispered, and repeated it again and again.

Even before my lord arrived the men were out, a dozen of them, clustering like bees about the fallen, and before the clatter of hoofs and the thunder of the crash had ceased to echo from the walls they had flung themselves upon the writhing heap, secured the kicking pony by main force, and with nervous arms were dragging two forms clear. One, one, lay senseless and motionless in their arms. The other tottered free, and, white-faced, supported by the wall, "Oh, was I wrong?" Rachel wailed, looking round on the men with terrified eyes. "Have I killed him? Was I wrong?"

A single man had a thought to spare for her. One voice—it was Coker's—answered her. "No, you were d—d right!" he said huskily. "He'd ha' been smashed like an egg 'gainst that lintel!" Then, "Don't take on, my lord," he continued. "Don't

take on! He's alive! I'll swear he's alive!" he repeated desperately—for he did not believe it.

Men, women, all, summoned by the sound of the fall, were crowding round now, some hysterical, some mute and aghast, one here and there peering fearfully over another's shoulder. Only Bowles remembered my lady and started to meet her. But his aid was not needed. In a moment she was among them, dry-eyed and quiet, and the roughest men made way for her.

Coker lifted the lad, but, "I'll carry him," the father said jealously, and took the light form from his arms. He stroked back the hair that had fallen over the forehead, and gave a long look at the pale, bloodstained face. He turned to the house-door.

But on the threshold he gave a curt order, and the chaise, the scared horses flogged to a canter, bounded from the yard to fetch the Ringwood apothecary. Another order, as brief, and a man flew to the stables to saddle a hunter and gallop to Salisbury—there was no surgeon nearer.

My lady clutched her husband's sleeve as if she would never let it go, and together, with the boy's head drooping lifeless from his shoulder, they threaded the passages and climbed the stairs. Mrs. Jemmett panted before them, and opened a door, then unbidden hastened for sponges and water. My lord laid the small form—oh, so small it seemed now—on the bed, and with shaking fingers began to loosen the little stock and put off the bloodstained clothes, while my lady, watching with hungry eyes for the flutter of an eyelid, wiped the blood from the face that lay so white on the pillow, so much more like to death than life. Jemmett held the bowl, while my lord's valet, gently insinuating himself, brought defter hands to the task of undressing. About the half-open door hung a score of terrified servants, those for the most part who had no business there. They augured the worst, and some sobbed noisily. They whispered that the boy was dead.

But he was not dead—yet. The heart still beat faintly, but it beat. My lord had assured himself of that, and presently, when all had been done that they dared to do, he signed to the servants to go, and he and my lady were left alone, standing together beside the bed. With one prayer in their hearts and woe in their eyes they looked at one another. He opened his arms, and without a word, in the hush that lay on the great house stricken by calamity, she fell into them and felt the heart that suffered with her beat against hers. And tears came to her relief.

CHAPTER XXXIV

SUSPENSE

IN the confusion Rachel was overlooked, yet not entirely. Some hand of housemaid or kitchen-maid helped her to her room, brought hot water and aided her to wash, soothed the hysterical excitement that now that the danger was past prostrated her. Nor was it unnatural that the girl should be overlooked at the first or should meet with less care and attention than she deserved, for only the Earl and the man on the carriage—and Coker or another from a window—had witnessed the part that she had played. And though the truth became quickly known, and was spread by many tongues, it was at first believed that the runaway had knocked down the governess as she stepped into the chaise.

For a time she could only cry in an agony of doubt, "Oh, if I have killed him! If I have killed him!" and live over again the dreadful moment when they had been hurled to the ground. And the maid, scared by her hysterical fit and ignorant of the facts, could only do her best, with such words as came to her, to comfort her. "'Twas no fault of yours, miss! You couldn't help it!" she babbled. "Nobody can blame you, miss."

"Oh, but his mother! His mother!" Rachel wailed. "What will his mother say? Please, please," as she grew a little more composed, "go and ask if he is alive. And come and tell me. Promise you will come and tell me," she insisted, clinging to the girl's sleeve. "Ah,"

and she gave way to a fresh burst of grief, "if he is dead!"

The maid did not understand where the trouble lay, but she promised, and glad to be nearer the centre of excitement and to satisfy her own curiosity, she hastened away on her errand; while Rachel, though she ached in every limb, paced the floor in dreadful suspense. The thing that her brave heart had inspired her to do, now seemed to her the most dreadful mistake, the origin of all the evil. And if the consequences were to be fatal? Anguished by the thought, she cast herself on her knees and hid her face on the bed—oh, that he might live! That he might live! That she might be spared this at least!

She was still on her knees, gripping the coverlet, with her face buried deep in it, when the door opened. The sound did not reach her, and for a moment the Countess gazed at the little prostrate form, her own face working convulsively. Then, "Miss South! Miss South!" she whispered.

Low as the accents were, Rachel heard them, and sprang to her feet. She turned and saw. "Oh!" she cried, and raised her hands as if she would ward off the mother. "Is he—is he——?" She could not continue, but her eyes spoke for her.

"He lives," the Countess murmured through her tears, and the next moment—Rachel never knew how or who made the first advance—the two were in one another's arms, and my lady was holding the girl to her, soothing her, stroking her hair, pouring out broken words of gratitude. "There is hope, good hope," she murmured. "He lives, and through you. Through you! Oh, we should go on our knees to you! My dear, forgive me! Forgive me!"

Rachel could not answer in words. She could only weep in a transport of thankfulness. At last, "I was afraid," she stammered. "Oh, I was afraid that I had killed him!"

"You saved him! Our boy! They say that it was the only chance. And there is good hope, thank God! Ah, it was He sent you to us, and set you there and gave you the courage! My dear, my dear, what shall we say to you?" And they wept in one another's arms, two women brought together at last by a common feeling, set on one level, meeting on the one ground of their womanhood.

But life even in such moments does not stand still. Someone knocked. "If you please, my lady, the doctor is here."

The Countess dried her tears and put Rachel in a chair. "Come in," she said.

The apothecary entered, burly, smiling, at home—it was his hour also, for him too rank had for the time ceased to count. "So this—this is the heroine, is it?" he said cheerfully. "Well, what's amiss? Let me feel your pulse, young lady. Umph! Spir. Am., I see. Just walk across the room, my dear. Good! Nothing to alarm your ladyship. No harm done."

As he mixed a dose the mother glided from the room, and Rachel's eyes sought his and asked a question. "Unconscious," he pronounced, "and will be for some hours. Result of concussion—natural result. No fracture, my dear, and every hope. Dr. Stephens will be here in an hour or so, but there is only one treatment —to keep the patient quiet and trust to nature. He may lie like that for twenty-four hours and no harm done."

Presently Rachel also was left to nature, and in her bed was sleeping the sleep of exhaustion. And on the great house that for an hour or two had pulsed with life, with raised voices and hurrying feet, fell the stillness of suspense. For though the physician bore out the apothecary's view—with such reservations as befitted his station—the boy lay through the long hours of the afternoon and gave no sign of life. My lord paced the library, and each hour ascended to

inquire or to murmur a word of encouragement to his wife; while she, hidden by the curtains of the bed, sat untiring, devouring with hungry eyes the still face that lay so deathlike on the pillow, the form that looked so pitifully small in the wide bed.

For a time the knowledge that he lived and that there was hope had sufficed. But with every hour of waiting fear grew and increased. The servants, ever inclined to the darker view, shook their heads and whispered gloomily; and when sunset came the twilight found a change. It found the library deserted, and my lord softly pacing the bedroom or standing silent by the bed, my lady's hand in his. Hope that had flamed high at noon fluttered low in the dusk, and only the burly apothecary and the physician—and he with growing caution—still fanned it and kept it alight. The watchers' fears already pictured the end. The little heart that beat so feebly might so easily cease to beat.

But as the tall clock in the hall, where the lamps shone on empty grandeur, struck nine, a breath, a quiver rân through the passages, ran through the house, reached in a twinkling the farthest purlieu where stable-lads bedded their horses, or scullery-maids wept over the sink. He had spoken! He had spoken! The house stirred and stretched itself. Bowles swore in his pantry and blew his nose. Mrs. Jemmett dried her eyes and reached for the teapot. A footman deliberately dropped a plate, and after kicking the fragments far and wide fell to fisticuffs with his fellow. And my lord, coming hurriedly out of the bedroom, fell over Rachel, who should have been still in bed, wrung her hand as if he would never let it go, and went by her speechless. And Ann—Ann who had crouched on the stairs for hours, tearless and silent, solemnly burned her favourite doll in the dining-room fire—a rite the secret of which was known only to herself.

. . . . .

The crises of life pass and to pathos succeeds bathos. The water swirls above the depths, it slides on, and ripples over the shallows. A casual eye turned on the party assembled at the breakfast-table ten days later would have noted little change though so much had happened. Ann, turbulently demanding butter with her jam, Bodmin dragging her back by the hair as she made a long arm for it, Rachel timidly interposing, with an eye to the ruling powers, my lord exclaiming, "For God's sake, Miss South, give her the butter and whip her afterwards!" my lady silent and absent, with a crease of pain between her eyes—all seemed to be as it had been.

In Rachel, least of all, did any change appear. She bent her smooth head over her plate, and her interference with the children was if anything more diffident. But Bowles, bearing in the letter-bag—and with an important face, for the postman had told him what was in it—knew that here was a change and that the little governess whom he had dubbed a daughter of mischief now sat in honour, not the less because it was slightly marked.

Lord Ellingham opened the bag and spread out the letters. "Hallo! Here's a *Gazette*!" he exclaimed, and he selected the paper from the mass and tore it open, while Bowles in the act of leaving the room took the liberty of pausing to hear the news. "Yes, by gad, news at last," my lord continued. "Eh? Oh, here it is!" as the others turned anxious faces to him. "D'you hear, my lady? London, in Copenhagen Roads"—yes, this is it. 'Admiral Sir Hyde Parker is pleased to report'—umph! Umph!" He read in silence, his eyes travelling rapidly down the paper.

My lady could bear the suspense no longer. "Is he safe?" she asked. "Fred! Tell us! Don't keep us waiting!"

"George? Blest if I know!" he answered. "I

can't make out anything. He reports, reports—oh, I see. Begs to refer their lordships to Lord Nelson's dispatch—there, Nelson again, d—d if the man don't always come to the top—for the issue of the action. Yes, all right!" His voice rose sharply and betrayed his relief. "He's all right, Kitty! 'Reports with deepest concern the loss of Captains Mosse and Riou' —so George is all right! Hurrah!"

"Hurrah!" Bodmin waved arms and legs and knocked down a plate.

My lady's relief showed itself in a different fashion. "Thank God!" she said softly. And having risen to her feet in her excitement, she sat down again. "Thank God!" she repeated, and she looked at Rachel. But Rachel was bending over Ann's hair-ribbon, assiduously re-tying it; and had not my lady marked with a woman's eye the trembling fingers that fumbled over the task, she might have been deceived.

"Yes, well done, George," Lord Ellingham commented. "Lucky chap, isn't he? Seems to have been a devilish hot business! Ah, here's Lord Nelson's story at last. 'Elephant off Copenhagen. In obedience to your directions to report the proceedings of the squadron named in the margin'—Lord, the man might be reporting on so many firkins of lard! Good! Good!" His eyes ran on as he read to himself. "But how long-winded these heroes are! Ah! here we have it! 'Sank, burned and took seventeen sail of the line'—gad, what a butcher he is!—'being the whole of the Danish fleet south of the Crown battery'—wonder he left any to the north of it, must have been on his blind side, I suppose! 'Irreparable loss of gallant and good Captain Riou. Acknowledge debt to every Captain, Officer, and Man for their zeal and distinguished bravery on this occasion. With sorrow compelled to place the name of Captain Mosse also on the list of killed, and among the severely wounded——'"
He stopped abruptly, staring at the paper.

My lady rose, her eyes wide. "Not—not George?" she gasped.

"I'm afraid he's hit," my lord said slowly.

Her hands clattered helplessly among the cups and saucers. "What—what does it say?" she muttered. "Tell us, quick!"

"Come, he's not killed, my dear."

"Read it! Read it! For heaven's sake, let us know the worst!"

"Well, he's badly hit, I'm afraid," my lord owned reluctantly, looking up at her and then down at the paper. "'And among the severely wounded the name of Captain Dunstan of the *Polyphemus*, who showed'" —his voice shook a little—"'a noble example of intrepidity and devotion to duty.'"

The words of praise were too much for my lady's self-possession. She sat down and burst into tears, covering her face.

Bowles had garnered the news and fled to spread it, and my lord looked helplessly at the awed children, then at their governess. "Will you get her a glass of water, Miss South?" he said.

Rachel had taken herself in a hard grip—what, after all, was he to her?—and she rose and hurried for the water. She dared not pause, for the words "severely wounded" had stamped themselves on her brain, and if she stayed even for a moment to think of him suffering and in pain she knew that she would betray her foolishness. With a steady hand she brought in the glass, glueing her eyes to the margin that she might carry it steadily, her every faculty centred on that one thing. My lord had moved to his wife's side and was leaning over her. "There, there," he said, as he took the water, "it will be all right. Cheer up, my dear. You know George is as hard as nails and it will take a lot to knock him over. We shall have him here in a week, and will soon nurse him up again. You'll see it will be all right."

"Will they make him an Admiral, father?" Bodmin asked. He at any rate was ready to look on the bright side.

"In his turn, my son."

My lady looked up with a faint smile. "I'm very foolish," she said. "We'll—we'll all hope for the best, children. But"—she looked round her with a startled face as if she had suddenly remembered something—"where is Miss South?"

"She went out," Ann answered. "I suppose she saw that she wasn't wanted." Her tone proclaimed a grievance, for, strange to say, Ann had become her governess's champion.

The two elders exchanged glances. "Well, you're not wanted either," my lord said. "So off you go, children. Your uncle will be all right."

They went pretty readily—they too liked to spread the news—and when the door had closed behind them, "Well, there's no harm done there," my lord said with meaning. "Didn't turn a hair, that young lady! And a good job too, only if George is in earnest I shall be sorry if she takes him for other reasons and don't care for him. I forgot about her in thinking of you, and she was as cool as this glass."

My lady smiled through her tears. "She cares," she said.

"Does she, begad? Well, I saw no sign of it."

"You wouldn't," my lady rejoined, speaking out of her superior wisdom. "I am going to her presently."

"But—you won't say anything, Kitty?"

"To commit George?" My lady wondered at man's obtuseness. "Heaven forbid! He may have changed his mind. Men do," she added, her lip trembling.

My lord, still on his feet, cut himself a morsel from the loaf and ate it slowly. "Not George," he said. "He's not of that sort. But I'm afraid he has his troubles before him."

My lady was silent.

He looked hard at the loaf as if he doubted about another slice. It was home-made bread, and of it toast was made such as is unknown to-day. "Yes, I am afraid he has," he mumbled. "Mine are behind me. I made 'em myself, but anyway, they are behind me. Do you believe me, Kitty?"

"He hoped so," she murmured unsteadily. "But I don't know that he believed it."

"It doesn't matter what he believed," my lord said doggedly. "It was the last thing he said to me—if he doesn't come back. Only he didn't call them troubles, he called them by a harder word—he was never mealy-mouthed, George, God bless him! However, it is not what he hoped or what he believed that matters. It is what you believe."

My lady looked straight before her down the table. She did not speak and apparently she was not moved. But hidden in her lap under the edge of the table her hands were gripping one another so fiercely that the nails were red.

"You've got a good many things to forgive," my lord continued, with his eyes still fixed on the loaf. "And perhaps you cannot, and I don't blame you. I never have blamed you in thought—no, nor in word, you'll do me that justice. Indeed, I've thought a great deal of how you have taken it, Kitty—till just the other day—and I have admired you. I would not have had it otherwise. And he that will not when he may—I know all that. But there are the children. They are growing up and will soon know. And what you cannot do for me, you may be able to do for them."

"No!" my lady said.

He winced. "I don't know quite what you mean by that," he answered. "But I do know this, and I'll be quite plain. If you can't forgive freely and fully—and I know it's hard, but it's best to be frank—it's

no use. "I'm no saint, as you know very well. I'm a man at any rate, and it must be all or nothing. You understand that?"

"Yes, I understand."

"It was George's wish."

"I understand that too," she said. He spoke to me too. He has been my best, my only friend, the truest, staunchest friend. But I wouldn't do it for that, and I will not. No! No!" She repeated the word firmly. "Neither for George nor for the children—do you think I have no pride, no respect for myself, that I can forget"—she shivered—"so easily? So lightly? No. I will keep up appearances for the children's sakes. I will continue to do that as I have done it. But no more, even for his sake."

He stared moodily at the loaf. After an unhappy pause, "Kitty," he said, "I thought—I hoped that you were kinder."

"No!" she retorted sharply. "You mean that you thought I was weaker. But there is a little pride, a little self-respect left to me still, though God knows that it has been dragged in the dust. I will sit at your table and entertain your guests. I will make no stir. I will continue to do my duty as I see it, if I have strength enough. But"—she turned her face to him, and for the first time looked at him—"for forgiveness complete and perfect, Fred, there is only one price. I will not prostitute myself. I will only be my husband's wife, if he loves me."

"God bless you, Kitty!" he cried. He held out his arms to her and fairly broke down.

But she drew back. "Are you sure? Are you quite sure, Fred? For God's sake," she said, and her voice trembled, "do not deceive me and yourself. It is for always. You know—you know there can be no second time."

Then it seemed that she saw what she wished to see in his face, for a moment later, "God bless

you, Kitty!" he repeated. "You are too good for me."

"God bless George, sir!" she replied, blushing like a girl, as she patted her hair into place. Her eyes were shining.

"Shall I promise you again?"

"No," she said, smiling through her tears. "It is all in that—if you love me and want me."

CHAPTER XXXV

THE BETTER PART OF COURAGE

AN hour later Lady Ellingham went slowly up the stairs. The sunbeams entering by a window on the landing shone athwart the sloping line of ancestors, full-length and in heavy gilt frames, that gave to the wide stairway its stately, sombre air. She passed upward beneath one after another—the beauty leaning on an urn who had waited on Queen Caroline and shared her painful secrets, the Dunstan with the secretive face who had been minister and all but sovereign at Naples, the soldier in the flowing Steinkerke who waved a futile sword against a background of smoke. There had been days, many days, when they had seemed to frown on her.

But to-day they smiled. At the window on the landing she stood and looked out, savouring with moist eyes the possession and the consciousness of happiness; and all the tall waving forest without, all the world of trees that had for months closed their buds against winter's nip, waved a welcome, greeting with bursting leaves the sunshine and the birds' carols that found an echo in her full heart.

But her errand lay higher, and tearing herself away she passed up barer stairs and narrower ways—decked, these, with Italian prints, faded and damp-stained, in maple frames; the Forum at Rome, the Mole of Hadrian, a Lucretia with the dagger in her bosom. She passed through the swing-door that squeaked, she reached the governess's room. She

would fain have all happy this blissful day. She knocked.

"Miss South?"

"Oh!" in a startled tone. A bed creaked, but no movement towards the door declared itself.

My lady drew her conclusions. "I've come to tell you that there is better news, Miss South," she announced. "There was a letter in the bag—Lord Ellingham found it later—from Captain Otway, who brought over the dispatches. Captain Dunstan has lost his arm, but he is doing well and is believed to be out of danger."

An exclamation, an inarticulate word!

"He will be with us in a week or ten days. Don't trouble, my dear," for now there was a reluctant movement within, "to come out. We thought that you would like to know."

Without waiting for more Lady Ellingham turned and went through the swing-door and down the stairs. "There," she thought, but not without a pang, for she was a woman, "George cannot say that I have not played him fair. I see it is to be, but it is a pity after all."

Lord Ellingham was waiting for her in the hall, and her cheek bloomed and her eyes fell, as she turned the carved newel-post and saw him. "Well?" he asked eagerly. "What did she say, Kitty?"

"Nothing," my lady replied with a smile.

"Come, then, how did she look?"

"I didn't see her."

He was disappointed. "Well, I thought that you would have found out something."

She looked at him, laying a shy hand on his arm—for the sake of touching him. "I found out all, sir."

"Then she——"

My lady nodded. "Yes, it is as I thought," she said soberly.

"But how could you tell, my dear?"

Her eyes laughed. "Did I tell you?" she murmured.

He looked at her. "Lord, what a fool I have been!" he said. And to hide something else, "Let us go out, my dear. It is a glorious morning."

But the spring brings showers as well as sunshine. And though the brightness of my lady's eyes was no longer dimmed by a cloud, and she had often to lower them that she might not betray herself to the very servants who waited on her, the outer world was grey and the trees dripped on a morning three days later, when Rachel knocked at the door of the Countess's room. Bidden to come in, the girl entered. Her face was grave and her lips were set in an unnatural line.

My lady put aside her work. "Well, my dear?" she said. "What is it? Has Ann been misbehaving again?"

"No. She is wonderfully good—for her. I have come," Rachel was clearly and manifestly nervous, "to ask—— Would you—I am sorry to inconvenience you, but would you—please to release me?"

The Countess stared. "Release you, my dear?" she exclaimed. "Why? Do you mean that you want to go? To leave us?"

"If you please."

"Do you mean now—at once?"

"If you please."

"But why? Why?" Lady Ellingham turned herself so as to face the governess more squarely. "What in the world do you mean? What has happened? Is your mother ill?"

"No. But—but I wish to go."

"I never heard of such a thing!" my lady cried. "What has happened? If it is not Ann—has anyone been rude to you? If so, I will very soon——" She broke off as another idea occurred to her and brought the colour to her face. "Or is it—surely, surely you

are not so foolish! You don't mean, child, that you are going back to what I said a fortnight ago, when—when something had put me out. I was not well, and, my dear, if you are bringing that up again, if you are so silly after all that has happened, I shall have—indeed I shall have a poor opinion of you."

"It is not that!"

"But——"

"Indeed, indeed it is not that!" For a moment the girl's distress broke through her resolved air. "But—I am not happy here, and—I wish to go." She twisted and untwisted her fingers.

"Silly girl, you would be no happier elsewhere. I am sure of that, and I shall not let you go. Where shall I find anyone to manage Ann as well as you do? There, my dear," my lady put the matter aside and turned to her work, "run away and put this foolish idea out of your head."

But Rachel held her ground. "I must go," she said in a low voice. "I have written to my mother that—that I am coming."

"Then you had no right to do so. And you must write again and tell her that you are not coming. Come, run away. That is settled."

But Rachel persisted. "I must go," she said. "I want to go."

"Without notice?"

Rachel's lips trembled. "I am sure that you are too kind to keep me against my will," she faltered. "I want to go! I want to go!" she repeated, clasping her hands. "I am not happy here."

My lady considered her in silence. "Miss South," she said at last in an altered tone. "I hope—I hope that it is not as I begin to suspect. I do trust that it is not Mr. Girardot that you are unhappy about? If I thought that it was that, I should write to your mother——"

"Oh, don't do that!" Rachel exclaimed, her cheeks

flaming. "It is an insult to suppose that I"—she stopped, and in a moment her whole aspect changed, and lowering her eyes she traced a pattern on the carpet with her toe—"that I am thinking of him! But perhaps—it has something to do with that. I met him here, and as long as I am here I am unhappy. I am very unhappy," she repeated in a piteous voice, "and, if you please, I must go."

"Oh, dear, dear," my lady said, and her face was grave. "Yet you know, you must know that he is not worthy of you! That he is not worthy of a single thought. He deceived you, and——"

"But we cannot always—we are not always able ——" Rachel's faltering voice trickled into silence, leaving the sentence unfinished.

"I am very, very sorry," the Countess said, and her face bore out her words. "This is sad. Don't you think that time, my dear——"

"Not here," Rachel murmured.

"Oh, dear, dear," my lady repeated. She looked really upset. "And you want to go at once?"

"To-morrow—if I may. Oh, Lady Ellingham, please let me go to-morrow."

The Countess sighed. "Very well," she said, at last. "It shall be as you wish. But you will remember, my dear, that wherever you are, we are your friends. That you can never be as others to us. You know that we owe our boy's life to you, and perhaps in a few months—— But I shall write to your mother."

That alarmed Rachel. "But you won't tell her——"

"Why you are leaving us? No, for I trust to your good sense. I am sure that you will have the strength to conquer this fancy. Otherwise it would be my duty to write. As it is, your mother will think it strange that we should part with you so lightly. She will think us very ungrateful, my dear. You must promise me that you will put this unhappy feeling out of your mind."

Rachel said meekly that she would try. She meant it.

"For that way lies nothing but misery. Nothing can come of it. You see that for yourself?"

"I do, I do!" Rachel answered miserably. "That is why I want to go."

"Oh, dear, dear!" my lady repeated. "Well, I'll give the orders, but I don't know what Ann will say."

And for some minutes after Rachel had crept away my lady sat in deep thought. In the end she seemed to see compensation. "Perhaps it is for the best," she reflected. "He may have thought better of it, and, look at it how you will, it is a *mésalliance*. Yes, it is for the best, no doubt. But I hope that he will not blame me."

It was Bowles who was this time the first to hear the news, and Bowles who, laden with it, broke in on Mrs. Jemmett's after-dinner nap. "Well," he announced, "if I don't astonish you this time, Mrs. J., I'm d——d."

"You do astonish me!" the housekeeper retorted, as she sat up and straightened her cap. "If I have told you once, my man, I have told you a dozen times—no language in this room!"

"Excuse! But, by gum, ma'am, that girl's going!"

Mrs. Jemmett stared. "Not the governess?"

"You've said it, ma'am."

"Umph! Well, I'll believe it when I see it. Don't stare, man, like a duck in thunder. They couldn't let her. Why, I told you myself no longer ago than yesterday that I saw my lady put her hand on her shoulder in the hall as if—why just as if——"

"Well, she's going," Bowles persisted. "I met Priscilla on the front stairs, and, 'You've no business here,' says I, pretty sharp. 'I want some string,' says she, 'and I saw a piece——' 'You'll see the outside of the door with a flea in your ear!' I answered. 'String? What do you want with string? It's not

the governess going this time!' 'It's just that, Mr. Bowles,' says she, whimpering, 'and her bag——' 'Now, none of your lies,' I said, and I gave the girl a good shake. 'You are up to some game of your own, you young baggage!' 'Indeed I'm not, sir,' says she. 'It's gospel truth. She's going and her bag——' 'D—n her bag!' I said, but I saw that the wench believed it and I came away. I knew that you'd like to hear."

Mrs. Jemmett ruminated. "It's odd," she said, "if so be it's true. Why should she go? It's not her ladyship this time, that's certain."

"Her ladyship? Why you might light candles at her eyes these days! She wouldn't hurt a fly. A blind man might see how things are with her! Didn't she order the Queen's quilt that my lord sets such store by to be got out of the satinwood chest, and put——"

"Bowles!" Mrs. Jemmett exclaimed. "You trench, man, you trench! If you don't know by this time that there are things that in well-conducted houses are not noticed——"

"But one can't help one's thoughts, ma'am," Bowles pleaded. "Don't say now as it don't set you thinking, Mrs. J.?"

"I hope I am not that kind of person," Mrs. Jemmett replied stiffly.

Bowles dropped the subject. "Well, anyway, it's not my lord," he said. "Honey won't melt in his mouth. But I am not so certain about the young ladyship. She's a little devil in her tantrums, and she and miss had a turn-up yesterday."

"And she went half an hour later," Mrs. Jemmett rejoined from the height of superior knowledge, "and asked miss to box her ears. Priscilla was there and told me."

"Then I'm fair flummoxed."

"It don't take much to flummox you, Bowles. If you ask me, I think the girl has been setting her cap at my lord, and now she sees it's no good, she's off."

The butler stared. "Well, set a woman to catch a woman," he said. "I'd not have thought of that in a month of Sundays. But you've a powerful mind, Mrs. Jemmett, and if you'd only a softer heart and sometimes thought of yours truly——"

"I think very little of him," the housekeeper retorted with a heightened colour.

"For, as for quilts, ma'am, and well you know it, it's not the quilt as matters, it's the——"

"Bowles!" Mrs. Jemmett rose in her outraged modesty. "I'm surprised at you!"

CHAPTER XXXVI

HOME

SHE was going home, to her mother, to Ruth, to the cottage by the sea. Every turn of the wheels brought her nearer, and already she could picture the rapturous welcome, the loving embrace that awaited her at her journey's end. Yet the hoof-beat of the horses as the carriage rolled along the road beside the Ringwood water-meadows, where the king-cups already laid golden patches on the green and the new-risen sun drank up the mists above Somerley, failed to elate her. Home? The word did indeed carry her mind back to her departure thence and to the incidents of that first journey; but it was with something like envy that she recalled the fears of that day, the shyness that had enfolded her, her misgivings lest she should miss the coach, her apprehensions of the reception that awaited her. She could smile at them now. They had been but the tremors of youth and inexperience. For, had she but known it, she had been happy then, heart-free, care-free, untouched by the real troubles of life. Now——

She sank lower in her corner, a small, lonely figure staring out with sad eyes, as the chaise rattled over the bridge at Fordingbridge and swerving to the right passed before the Greyhound. For there she recalled another scene, a night scene; and once more she slid, sore and aching, from the saddle; once more crept, too weary to resist, into the shelter of the wondering, awakened inn. How kind he had been to her, how thoughtful, how

considerate—though he too must have been racked with weariness! With what care, veiled under rough manners, had he lapped the poor dependant about, fenced her from curiosity, attended to her wants! And, last kindness of all, with what firmness had he enforced her return, and at the Folly had shielded and protected her! Fondly, foolishly, she recalled it all; trifles that she had not seemed to see, words that she had not seemed to hear, touches that set her blood tingling. She shed a few tears in the corner of the chaise, and, "It was time that I came away!" she thought. "A few kind words and I—oh, I am a fool! I am a fool! What would my mother say!"

And at Salisbury, where she had to wait an hour, strolling up and down between the White Hart and the water-channel that ran along the base of the Close Wall, it was the same. She might have visited the Cathedral—it was but a step. But she preferred to pass her time within sight of the yard, and again she saw, but with other eyes, the tall figure in the shabby sea-cloak that talked with the landlord, again she saw the Captain stalk masterfully into the room where she cowered in her corner, saw him tug at the bell, heard him call for "that catlap," owned the good-nature that made her share it and forced him, in sheer pity, to put up with her company. Nor did her thoughts stop there—for what to the woman who loves is dearer than the man's foible, the weakness that makes her mother as well as mistress to him? Again she heard him hum his eternal

> "Oh, Hood and Howe and Jervis
> Are masters of the main,
> Cornwallis sweeps the narrow seas
> And logs the weather-vane.
> And Duncan in his Seventy Four,
> His Venerable Seventy Four."

Her eyes filled. How little had she understood the man, his nobleness, his generosity! How little foreseen the

future, or her own weakness! "But indeed I will conquer it," she vowed, furtively drying her eyes. And through the long coach-hours, while passengers entered and left unheeded, and Shaftesbury and Crewkerne flitted by unnoticed, she repeated her vow—yet now and again thought, perforce, of his lost arm and his maimed manhood and shed a few more tears. But that was in the darkness when they were not far short of Exeter; and they were to be the last, the very last. Henceforth she would be sensible!

And beyond Exeter, whence she drove through the night in a fly, giving her orders with an aplomb that a year ago would have astonished her, she flattered herself that she had succeeded. The nearness of her home, the sight of familiar things looming up and passing by, and presently the sound and tang of the sea, and the shimmer of the moon on its waters, shifted the direction of her thoughts. How often in the past months had she pictured her return, how often longed with passion to see the lighted porch and hear the home voices! And now—now they were at hand, ay, they broke upon her. Now in a moment, all that she had pictured was hers; and if the two loved figures silhouetted against the cheerful doorway, if the clinging mother-arms, the loving greeting, the homely room and the tea-board twinkling in her honour—if these had not drawn from her tears of another nature, she had not been Rachel, she had not been the affectionate creature that she was!

For the time, the Folly, its life and its inmates, receded into a dim background, and with a dear hand clasped in each of hers, she rested on the bosom of the love that had been hers from childhood. She looked round with a full heart; she saw the old things, the old greying tabby curled up on a chair, the china dogs on the shelf, the hissing kettle, and asked herself what, what more could she wish for or desire.

And still and withal there were little pin-pricks to

be borne, questions to answer that were awkward to answer. Why had she left? And so suddenly? And on what ground? And what had the Countess said? And had she been horrid? With some of these it was easy to deal. It was easy to assure Ruth that there had been no balls and that she had not once danced, that she had sometimes come down in the evening, and that of late she had breakfasted with the family; that my lord did not wear a star, and that my lady only drove with four horses and an outrider when she paid visits. But it was not so easy to answer her mother's questions as to her leaving; and though Mrs. South in these first moments of rejoicing did not push her inquiries, the mother's instinct discerned that there was something still to be explained. And presently she fancied that she had the clue to the secret.

For before Rachel had sat many minutes at her tea —and oh, the delicious meal taken in freedom with none but friendly eyes and hands about her!—the girl had herself a shock. "La, Rachel," Ruth cried, "and we'd forgotten! What do you think? But you know, I suppose? We had a visit from a beau of yours last week!"

"A beau of mine?" Rachel faltered, her hand arrested. "What do you mean, my dear?"

"And such a beau!" Ruth's eyes were dancing. "The handsomest man! And he talked beautifully. I fell in love with him myself."

"But who was it?"

Ruth laughed. "What will you give to know? Who, indeed? As if you don't know, cunning!"

"Indeed, indeed," Rachel said, avoiding her mother's eyes, "I don't. I cannot imagine who would come here."

"Not Mr. Girardot?"

Rachel's face flamed. "Mr. Girardot!" she exclaimed.

"And, oh, the dandy—I never! He hoped to find

you here and wished to know when we expected you, and inquired——"

"I hope you did not say that I was coming."

"We did not know," her mother replied sedately. Rachel's confusion had not escaped her. "He was only in the neighbourhood for a night, he said, and we could tell him nothing."

"I am glad of that," Rachel said. She had recovered her composure. "I do not like Mr. Girardot, and I do not wish to see him."

"Oh, but Rachel!" Ruth protested, quite cast down. "He is so good-looking! And he asked so anxiously after you."

"He is good-looking, but——"

"Perhaps his good looks are his best point," her mother said soberly.

"Yes, mother, that is so. I hope that he will not come again." And Rachel hastened to change the subject.

But naturally Mrs. South drew her conclusions. Pending Rachel's arrival she had been inclined to connect the girl's return with the stranger's visit; and she had given some rein to a mother's hopes and fears, for she knew from Rachel's letters who Girardot was and the position he had filled at the Lodge. But she knew little more, for Rachel had shrunk from telling the story. Now Mrs. South still connected the two events, but after a different fashion, and she was troubled; and when the lights had been put out, and the three were climbing the stairs, that seemed to Rachel's eyes steeper and narrower than of old, she got a word alone with her girl. "There is nothing between you and this gentleman, my dear?" she said. "You will tell me, I am sure, if there is."

"Nothing, dear mother, nothing!" But the girl's colour rose. "How could there be? He is married."

"Oh!" Mrs. South averted her eyes. She was startled. "I did not know that, of course." And she hastened to get away from a subject so dangerous.

"You left Lady Ellingham on good terms, I trust?" she asked anxiously. "There was no trouble?"

"None. She was most kind. She told me that she would give me the best of recommendations, and with that I shall have no difficulty in getting another situation. You see," Rachel continued, with an affectionate hug, "I am experienced now, mother. But with people not so grand, I hope. I was not"—with a quivering mouth—"very happy there."

"No, my dear, I understand that. And you were wise to come away. But now you are here we must keep you a little while. Ah, Rachel, how I have missed you!" And the two women laughed and cried in one another's arms.

But to the fledgling that has once flown from the nest, the nest is never the same again. And so Rachel, hiding a sore heart, discovered in the weeks that followed. Put the best face on it that she could, she was restless and unhappy. The hours that had once been too short for the daily tasks now seemed tedious and vacant. The old occupations no longer satisfied. The very affection that wrapped her about, filled her with self-reproach because it now failed to satisfy her. She longed to be alone, and often she stole away to pass hours by the sea, finding in its wide greyness and the sad, monotonous fall of the waves on the beach a something that suited her mood. She wandered away, only to return ashamed of the selfish feelings in which she had lapped herself. She told herself bravely that time would work a cure, and that by and by she would be again as she had been. But time is a medicine slow to operate, and meanwhile the girl suffered, unable to pluck from her heart the image that haunted it, or to put from her the memories that set her pulses leaping, the dreams that brought the blood to her cheeks.

No, though with shame she owned that she had only herself to blame: that she had given her heart to one who had not sought it nor asked for it, and who was

so far above her, so widely removed from her, that, could he be made aware of the gift, he must smile at her folly. And she had given it in return for what? For a few kind words, a service that, the man being what he was, he would have performed for a beggar-woman! And because he, Heaven save the mark, had lost an arm! For that, she told herself with cruel frankness, had put the finishing touch to her surrender!

It was weakness incredible, and with all her strength she strove to be cheerful, strove to be the daughter that she had been! She hid her feelings, and tried to make the best of things; and often her face would burn with shame as she sat with those who deemed her good, who held her sensible, nor in their innocence had it in them to conceive of her as she really was—possessed by this unmaidenly yearning, this feverish longing that racked her heart.

But strive as she might, Mrs. South was not deceived. She saw with clear eyes that all was not well with the girl, and she fancied that in the handsome tutor she held the key to the trouble. For a while she too comforted herself with the reflection that time would work a cure. But when a month had gone by and Rachel, in spite of all her efforts—and the mother saw that the girl made gallant efforts—still pined and moped, Mrs. South determined that a change must be made. She longed to keep the stricken lamb, never dearer to her than now; but a higher love gave her strength, and one morning, when Rachel had stolen away along the shore, she put on her bonnet and followed her.

"I will walk a little way with you, my dear," she said. "I want a breath of air. I have had the grocer's bill and it is larger than I expected. You haven't"—oh, the cunning mother!—"five pounds left of your salary, have you?"

Rachel fell into the trap. "Of course I have!" she cried. "And more! I will go back and get it, mother. How glad I am that I can help you!"

"Well, it is a help," Mrs. South admitted, and turned with her. "But there is no hurry. We need not go so fast, my dear."

But Rachel's thoughts were travelling even more swiftly than her feet, and in the direction that her mother desired. "My dear," she cried remorsefully. "And I have been living on you! I ought to have looked out for something before this! I will write an advertisement to-day. You know," she added cheerfully, "I am an experienced young woman now, recommended by the nobility and gentry."

"I am sorry to lose you, you know that. But ——"

"But there is that 'but,' isn't there, mother? And I don't mind a bit going out now! The first time it was rather terrible."

"Yes, Rachel, I know." And the mother's heart ached for her child. But she made no sign. It was better that the girl should go from her, and in a new scene, where she would be forced to exert herself, should win back her peace.

They were within a hundred yards of the cottage, and Rachel was planning her advertisement, when the little maid appeared coming to meet them. "What is it now?" Mrs. South exclaimed, "I am afraid that Deb has burned the potatoes again."

But it was not that. It was a visitor—a stranger. He had asked for the young mistress.

"Oh, dear!" Rachel exclaimed, her eyes betraying her alarm.

"Is it the gentleman who called a month or so ago?" Mrs. South asked anxiously.

But Deb could not say. She had been out when the other gentleman had called.

"Very well," Mrs. South said. "We will follow you." But when the maid had tripped away, "I am afraid that it is," she said, her face grave. "Do you wish to see him, Rachel?"

"No, certainly not."

"You don't——"

"No, no!" with anger. "I won't see him."

"Very well, my dear. Then you had better turn back. I will see him."

"And you will send him away, mother?"

"Certainly. I shall tell him that you do not wish to see him."

"Please, please do. I won't see him."

"That is enough, my dear," Mrs. South said, and leaving her daughter the mother went on alone. But as she approached the cottage her thoughts were busy and her face was sad. Rachel was acting as she would have her act, but Mrs. South had no doubt now that her conjectures were justified. This was a bad man and the cause of her daughter's unhappiness. He was a married man, and no doubt he had trifled with her—with a sigh Mrs. South recalled his good looks and his plausible address. Well, she must be plain with him; she must be round with him while she must not betray her daughter. As she walked she planned what she would say and how she would dismiss him. The task was no light one, no pleasant one. And it had fallen to her when she least expected it.

Meanwhile Rachel, hot with indignation, turned back, and as quickly as she could placed a sandhill between herself and the cottage. She felt herself outraged by Girardot's intrusion. It recalled things that she was bitterly anxious to forget; it brought home to her her perpetual, her hopeless weakness; it set her present folly in the worst, the most humiliating light. That the man should be so shameless, so persistent! That he should presume to follow her, to pursue her even in her mother's house! That he should dare to ignore the wrong that he had sought to do her, and the circumstances in which they had parted! Oh, he was abominable! He was utterly, utterly bad!

But—but, a small voice whispered, he was at least

constant. He had not, she reflected with shame, a heart for all comers, as she, wretched, feeble, fickle girl, had ! And if he suffered as she suffered ? The sea-gulls wailed above her head, the scrubby grass that clothed the sandhills rustled coldly in the breeze, the sea stretched away, grey, flat, illimitable under a leaden sky ; and suddenly chilled, stricken by an unhappy sense of kinship with him and of a common fate, Rachel owned the sadness of life. He suffered, and by his own fault. And she suffered, and by her own fault, for what plea, what defence had she to urge, when a woman's pride, a woman's reserve had twice failed her—in a twelvemonth ? The waves fell on the beach at her feet, coldly, sullenly, persistently, as they had fallen for ages and would fall for ages to come. They gave her melancholy answer.

She was wandering at large, no longer blaming him but herself, when a cry reached her ears, and, glancing behind her, she saw Deb waving to her from the crest of the sandhill—it was the one on which they spread their linen to dry on washing-days. She turned and went back to meet the girl, thankful that at any rate that was over. No doubt he was gone.

She found a minute later that her relief was premature. "If you please," the maid announced, "the mistress says, will you come in."

"The gentleman has gone ? "

"No, miss. The mistress is with him. She came out to send me." Rachel's heart sank. What could it mean ? What could he have told her mother ? She questioned Deb, but Deb was clear. The mistress had told her to find Miss Rachel and bring her in.

"Very well," Rachel said wearily, "I will come." And with lagging feet she followed Deb back to the cottage. If it had to be, it had to be. But what had he told her mother ? What strange colour had he put on things that had induced her mother to allow, nay, to wish her to see him ?

CHAPTER XXXVII

THE DULLARDS THAT MEN ARE!

HER mother was waiting for her in the porch, and their eyes met. "Oh," Rachel murmured, "must I see him?" She clasped her hands. Every fibre in her was in revolt against the interview.

Mrs. South's face wore a flush, and she looked worried and anxious. But her reply was decisive. "Yes, you must see him," she said. "That is quite certain. But—but oh, my dear," she continued, speaking with deep feeling, yet in a low voice, for the door of the parlour was only a pace away, "think before you speak. And don't, don't, my darling"—she laid a timid hand on her daughter's arm—"let a fancy, such as I fear you have, blind you to—I don't say your duty, Rachel, I don't dare, for I don't know all and I fear to press you. But promise me, promise me, my own, that you will not act hastily."

Rachel wondered. Surely, surely her mother, who knew her, might trust her to do right in so clear a case. And yet that mother was trembling with anxiety. "I have only one thing to say," she replied coldly. "You must know that, mother."

"Yet, oh, my dear, think!" And as Rachel turned to enter the parlour, Mrs. South caught her again by the sleeve—she did not seem able to let her go. "I fear to say too much, for I am in the dark. It has come as a great surprise to me. Yet it seems so—oh, I don't know how to say it, but"—she folded her in a hasty embrace—"may God guide you rightly! He

seems to me a good man, and if I could believe——"

Rachel cut her short. "He is not a good man," she said. "And I have only one thing to say to him. I have not fallen to that extent," with a look of reproach. "You may trust me, mother!" And heedless of a last appeal that Mrs. South would have urged, she passed with a firm step into the parlour and closed the door. The ordeal would be painful, but she was determined that it should be short.

He had been pacing the narrow room, but he had heard her step in the porch, and when she entered he was standing, looking through the latticed window. He had put off his cloak, that very cloak which had a cherished place in her memory, and a single glance should have informed Rachel who he was. But so strong was the fixed idea that for a whirling second or two her mind rejected the impossible, and she fancied that her sight deceived her.

Then—she knew. She grasped the certainty that the last person in the world whom she had expected to see had turned and with his back to the light was looking at her; and in the first rapture of surprise, of seeing him, of being in the same room with him, of being about to hear his voice, the blood fled from her face. She gripped the back of a chair, and dizzy with emotion supported herself by it. "Captain Dunstan!" she ejaculated.

The man's eyes devoured her, but his heart sank. For he had told himself, while he waited and his gaze roved over the humble ornaments, the household things that her touch had hallowed—he had told himself with craft that if she blushed when she saw him, all would be well—he would have his heart's desire. But seeing, instead of a blush, a white startled face, he told himself that all was wrong. Still he was no faint heart and he rallied. "Yes," he said. "You see, I have come to see you in your home. I fear I have taken you by surprise."

"My mother did not say——" she stammered, halted. "Of course—I did not expect you." Then with an effort, "Won't you sit down?" In an agony of nervousness Rachel turned, apparently to draw up the chair by which she stood, but in truth to hide the burning colour that now flooded her face. She need not have troubled herself, however; for as, summoning all her self-control, she faced him, her eyes fell on the empty sleeve pinned to his breast, and again her blood ebbed and her eyes filled. "Oh!" she exclaimed. "I am sorry!"

He understood. "About this?" he said briskly, shaking the stump. "Pooh, it's cheap at the price! They take me for Nelson in the street. A little awkward, as it is the right arm, you know. But"—for a moment his dark keen eyes dwelt on her—"I hope to replace it to-day."

She did not follow this, but, thank Heaven, she was regaining some control of herself. They were now seated, and, "I suppose that you are staying in the neighbourhood—with Lady Elizabeth, perhaps?" she murmured, in as commonplace a tone as she could manage. But why, oh why did not her mother come in?

"No," he replied in his downright fashion. "I'm not staying with Lady Elizabeth. I came to see you."

She was hopelessly at sea. What could he mean, and why did he look at her so oddly? It was impossible that he had taken that long journey to see her! She must have misunderstood him, or—yes, that must be it. He brought some message, an invitation to return, perhaps, from Lady Ellingham. And seizing in her embarrassment on the thought, "Lady Ellingham?" she murmured. "She is well, I hope?"

"She was yesterday."

"And—and Lady Ann?"

"Ann? Oh, Ann is never ill. She is like me."

"And"—she knew that she was talking absurdly,

but in her confusion and her fear of silence she felt that she must go through every member of the family—"and Lord Ellingham?"

"Fred? Oh, he's all right. And the boy. But I didn't come to talk about them."

"The forest," she said faintly, "must be looking lovely now."

"I hope you will judge for yourself." He straightened himself and stood up. After all, it was not much worse than a cutting out! "I didn't come to talk about that either."

He glanced darkly at her, and suddenly it was borne in upon Rachel that he too was not at his ease; and the discovery steadied her. "I came," he continued, looking at her and looking away again, "to rig a jury-arm, if you understand—two for one, if you understand, my dear. But it is a business I've no experience of. I know very well the port I am bound for, but I don't know how to lay the course unless you'll help me. But—you don't know what I am talking about?"

"No," Rachel confessed. She was looking at him with troubled eyes, and her heart was thumping painfully. It was impossible, oh, it could not be! And yet his manner was so odd.

"No, of course you don't." He began to pace this way and that, jerking the stump of the right arm. "How the devil should you? Eh? How should you? I've flown no colours. But do you remember that night at Whitsbury, Miss South? There!"—to himself—"I hope to God that's the last time! Well, I made up my mind that night that I'd found the wife that—that would suit me—if I could get her. But, mind you, it's no light thing to take a wife, and I am no youngster to take up with the first perticoat on the Hard; and I said to myself, 'I'll haul off a bit, and see if I am in the same mind.' And I've waited and I'm more of that mind than ever. And you may be sure, my dear, that I'm no Dutch ketch, veering and falling off when

the wind shifts a point, and where my hand goes my heart goes with it, and stays. I can't make pretty speeches, as they make 'em in drawing-rooms, but I stick by what I say. And," hesitating, "if you don't feel that you can take me at once—and, d—n it all, why should you ?—I'll haul off for a month and come back when you're ready."

Rachel's heart thumped no longer. She understood at last, and faced him with steadfast eyes, marvelling at her own firmness. The trouble would come later, when every blunt word that he had said, burnt in on her heart, would smart to agony. But for the moment she was firm, almost cold. Already she had made up her mind what she must answer, what was the only thing that she could answer. Yet—yes, she must have it clear. "I don't think that I understand," she said.

"But, confound it, I've been plain. Too plain, perhaps ? And I've spoken to your mother."

For a moment her voice failed her. Ah, but how good, how generous he was. Then, "Do you mean," she said, "that you are asking me to be your wife, Captain Dunstan ? "

"I've said so, haven't I ? Plump and plain. I meant to."

"Yes. But I couldn't believe it. I couldn't believe," she continued firmly, "that you could be so imprudent, so unwise. For," with a pale smile, "I might have accepted you, you know. The honour you do me is so great, so very great for one in my position, and you have so much to offer, that I might have been foolish enough to accept you, sir—not loving you. But I cannot be so unworthy of your good opinion. What you suggest is impossible. There is too great," she paused, marvelling anew at her own coolness, "there is far too great a distance between us, between Captain Dunstan and his sister's governess, for—for it to be possible for any happiness to come of it. This—this is my home, and I love it and am at ease in it. But you

couldn't be at home in it, nor I be happy or at home at Queen's Folly—among those to whom I do not belong. You know "—for a moment her voice trembled perilously—" there are flowers that will only grow on the north side of the wall."

" Fudge ! " he cried.

Rachel shook her head. " No," she said, " it is the best of sense."

" Then you don't care for me ! " He turned away, turned abruptly and looked through the window ; while Rachel sat stiffly in her chair, clutching herself lest even now pain should wring a cry from her. But it would soon be over—soon, and he would be gone.

He turned again. " Well, I don't know why the devil you should," he said, " as I never signalled you. It is my fault. But see here, my girl, couldn't you ? I don't say love me at once, but couldn't you like me ? Couldn't you like me well enough to sign articles by and by ? "

One last effort—but it was cruel, cruel to ask so much of her. " No," she answered slowly—and, ah, the pain it cost her, for she knew that with that word she barred the door that she had already closed on her happiness. " I am sure, Captain Dunstan, that I can never like you better than I do now. Or feel differently towards you. I am quite sure of that."

" Well," he answered, " that's flat. That's plain." He averted his eyes and stared at the wall. " I've a letter here from Kitty for you, but "—to himself—" no, why should I plague the girl with it ? If she don't like me, that's all. Only," turning almost savagely and looking down his long sharp nose at her, " if it's that d—d Girardot, I'll break his neck, d'you hear ? He's not fit to clean your shoes."

" It is not," she said dully. " I care nothing for him."

" Nor for me," he answered gloomily. Then after a pause, " Well, there it is." He held out his hand.

"I'm obliged to you for your honesty. Yes, damme, I am. You are what I thought you and what I knew you were, and I can't say more. Oh, d—n it, good-bye, and God bless you, and—don't let me make a fool of myself!"

She put a cold hand into his, and he wrung it so hard that at another time she must have cried out. Then he turned to the door. She watched him struggle left-handed with the latch—he did not seem to see well—watched him open the door at last and go out. She watched him dumbly, though it needed all her strength to hold back the cry of anguish that rose to her lips, the cry that would even now she knew bring him back to her side.

But when the door was shut upon him her strength failed. She could bear no more. As she heard his retreating footsteps she flung herself face downwards on the chair on which she had sat, and dry sobs shook her form, tore her bosom, stifled her. Oh, it was too much! Too much had been asked of her. And perhaps, perhaps she was wrong! Perhaps she had flung away her happiness for a scruple, a fancy, a figment of mistaken honour! If it were so!

He had found no one in the passage—the mother had fled upstairs to pray—and with a stern face he had struggled into his cloak and stalked away. He made with rapid strides for the little hamlet where he had left his post-chaise, and from which he had walked with joyous anticipation, with so hopeful a heart. Well it was over. All over!

But when he had placed fifty yards between himself and the cottage his hand, thrust into the pocket of his cloak, encountered his sister-in-law's letter, and he stood. "Yes," he muttered, frowning at the grey waste of sea that splashed sadly at his feet. "She may as well see what they think of her. It is but fair." He turned about with his usual abruptness, and as rapidly as he had come he retraced his steps. He strode

through the porch, he saw no one, and careless, as ever, of ceremony and intent only on his purpose, he opened the parlour door.

She did not hear him, much less see him. But he saw her. He looked down at the grief-racked little form, he heard the long slow sobs that shook it, he gazed spell-bound at the slender white nape and the mass of fair curls cast in abandonment on the out-stretched arms that grasped the chair! And, dull as he had been, he was no longer deceived. He read the meaning of it, and no change from cloud to sunshine sweeping over the heather-clad slope of a hill in autumn was more wonderful than the change that transformed his plain face. At last, "You little liar!" he said. "You little liar!"

The words were a thunder-clap. She looked up incredulous, confounded. Her eyes met his, and was it her fault if her piteous face betrayed the truth? If it told him what he knew already, if surprised and convicted, she had not a word to say, but, snatched up, had no longer the will to struggle or the breath to speak or lips to deny. If all the foolish wall of pretence that she had built up with anguish fell at a touch and left her on his breast.

"But I never, never lied to you," she protested a little later. "I only said that I could never love you better than I did. And it was true, sir."

"Like, you said, like, you little trickster!"

"Well, perhaps it was only liking," she replied demurely, but she did not deceive him twice. "Only, oh dear," and a cloud came over her happy, blushing face, "what will they say of it at the Folly? They will think you mad, and me—I do not know," she cried, shrinking, "what they will think of me."

"Who?"

"All of them, sir. Lady Ellingham and Lord Ellingham and—and all."

"Hang them all! And Kitty and Fred? You shall see

what they say." He took out the letter which, foolish, clumsy man, he should have shown her at the first.

As she read it her eyes filled with tears. "Oh, they are kind!" she cried. "They are kind!" She kissed the letter. "And yet I shall be afraid to see them!"

"Little silly!" he said. "Do you not know me yet? Do you think I am not master on my own quarter-deck?"

She looked at him daringly. "Then what am I?" she asked.

His eyes twinkled. He told her.

He stayed until late in the evening and, sailor-like, made himself at home. Rachel thought his manner to her mother delightful and loved him anew for it. And Mrs. South endeavoured to meet him in the same spirit. But the poor woman was weighed down by misgivings. She had been dazzled for an hour by the prospect opened before her daughter; she had hoped and even prayed that the girl might accept this grand, this incredible offer—the impulse was natural. But the man, now that she considered him at close quarters, was strange to her and formidable. He loomed large in the little room; he was plain and blunt, authority spoke loud in him, and doubtless her knowledge of his position doubled her sense of this. And awed by him, and deceived by Rachel's manner—for the girl was too happy and perhaps too shy to talk much—the mother trembled and repented.

And Ruth, had she been canvassed, would have agreed with her mother. From her corner she watched the two with the fascinated eyes of a girl emerging from childhood, and engrossed in what she saw, she marvelled. She thought the Captain grim and very awful, but far from a hero of romance. She wondered at her sister's courage in taking him, and above all she was curious. She coloured when Rachel laid a hand on his shoulder as she passed behind him. She thrilled when she saw the same daring spirit take his egg from

his grasp and cut off the top. She looked away when she detected him stretching out a hand to caress her sister's skirt. Above all, she burned with a devouring curiosity—had he kissed her ? It seemed a thing inconceivable, incredible, impossible—that stranger ! And when he did actually kiss her on taking leave, coolly, audaciously, and before their eyes, and Rachel, though she blushed deeply, made no demur, Ruth gasped. She felt that she had no more to learn. She was a woman, equipped for the world, experienced, without illusions.

The mother crushed down her fears until on their way up to bed she got her darling to herself. Then searching the girl's face with wistful eyes, as she held her tenderly to her, she put her misgivings into words. "For, oh, my dear, I am frightened," she said. "I was wrong to press you. If you don't feel sure, if you are not certain, draw back now, draw back, my dear, before it is too late. If you fear him, I will explain. I will see him myself——"

"Fear him ?" Rachel raised her brimming eyes to her mother's face, and what the mother read in them dispelled once and for all her doubts. "Oh, mother, I love him, I love him dearly ! He is the best, the kindest, the noblest of men ! He is mine, my man ! If I lost him now I think I should die ! "

. . . . .

He took her back to the Folly a week later, and on the way they had tea at the White Hart at Salisbury, and Rachel sat again in the chair in the dark corner to which she had once fled to avoid him ; she looked again through the red-curtained window that opened on the yard. And if he had not pulled the bell-rope with violence and called the tea "cat-lap," and boomed at John, and if the landlord had not come in respectfully to condole with him on the loss of his arm, the thing would not have been perfect. And after tea, while the fresh team was being harnessed, they strolled in the quiet

spacious Close, and she hung on his arm, and teased him. And in the chaise he hummed a new ditty:

"Oh, First of Seamen, mist or shine,
Thou shalt for ever break the line,
And England keep,
Dear England keep.

"Thy Elephant shall trumpet high,
Thy Agamemnon proud reply,
And laurels reap,
Thy laurels reap.

"Thy Vanguard and thy Captain too
Shall flaunt thy ghostly pennant blue,
And sacred keep,
Thy name shall keep,

"When all the hearts of Oak that swim
Shall tideless rest, their memory dim
In Ocean's deep,
In Ocean's sleep."

And her heart swelled, and she loved him for it. His voice, once so harsh, was sweet in her ears, and that which had been doggerel was by the magic of love's alembic turned to poetry. But as they climbed the ascent beyond Ringwood, and the prospect of the Folly began to rise before her, she put her hand into his and she fell silent.

"Ay," said Bowles, an hour later, "and I tell you, ma'am, it was as pretty a sight as you'd wish to see. The Captain, he stayed by the chaise seeing Charles and his man and the others take out the portmantles, and she come up the steps alone and frightened-like, hanging her head—she never was one for making the most of herself, as you know, Mrs. J., nor the figure to do it as some I could name. And first that little devil of a Lady Ann fell upon her and nearly knocked her down. Then half-way up his lordship meets her, and what he said I couldn't hear. But she answered flurried-like, 'I hope Lady Ellingham is well.' And he laughed—there's no one can laugh more jolly than his

lordship, I will say that—and says he, ' Your sister is waiting for you in the hall,' says he. And her ladyship met her at the top of the steps and took her and kissed her."

"There's not much in kisses," said Mrs. Jemmett grudgingly.

"Well, ma'am, that's not my opinion, Mrs. J. And I always have thought, and well you know it—that if you and me were to put our heads together—I could make you think different."

"Bowles!" Mrs. Jemmett's tone was awful. "You trench, man, you trench!"

"Well, ma'am," audaciously. "What if we were to try? You don't think——"

"I don't think of no such things," Mrs. Jemmett retorted. But a smile trembled on her lips.

THE END

Made and Printed in Great Britain by Butler & Tanner Ltd., Frome and London

STANLEY J. WEYMAN

IT appears to have been the success that attended his first novel, 'The House of the Wolf,' that encouraged its author, Mr. Stanley J. Weyman, to plan a story on more generous lines. In 'The House of the Wolf,' it is of interest to note, the character and conduct of the Vidame de Bezers find a parallel in one of the most remarkable incidents in the Massacre of St. Bartholomew.

THIN PAPER EDITION, in Twenty-three Volumes. Arranged Chronologically. With an Introduction in Volume One by the Author. F'cap 8vo. Bound in Red. Cloth, 3s. 6d. net; Leather, 5s. net each. Cloth Case to contain the 23 volumes, 5s. net.

1. THE HOUSE OF THE WOLF.
2. THE NEW RECTOR.
3. THE STORY OF FRANCIS CLUDDE.
4. A GENTLEMAN OF FRANCE.
5. THE MAN IN BLACK.
6. UNDER THE RED ROBE.
7. MY LADY ROTHA.
8. MEMOIRS OF A MINISTER OF FRANCE.
9. THE RED COCKADE.
10. SHREWSBURY.
11. THE CASTLE INN.
12. SOPHIA.
13. COUNT HANNIBAL.
14. IN KINGS' BYWAYS.
15. THE LONG NIGHT.
16. THE ABBESS OF VLAYE.
17. STARVECROW FARM.
18. CHIPPINGE.
19. LAID UP IN LAVENDER.
20. THE WILD GEESE.
21. THE GREAT HOUSE.
22. OVINGTON'S BANK.
23. QUEEN'S FOLLY.

HENRY SETON MERRIMAN

AS the biographical notice which appears in 'The Slave of the Lamp' points out, one of the strongest characteristics in the nature of Henry Seton Merriman, as in his books, was his sympathy with, and understanding of, the mind of the foreigner. For him there were no alien countries. He learnt the character of the stranger as quickly as he learnt his language. His greatest delight was to merge himself completely in the life and interests of the country he was visiting—to stay at the mean *venta* or the *auberge* where the tourist was never seen—to sit in the local cafés of an evening and listen to local politics and gossip; to read for the time nothing but the native newspapers, and no literature but of the land where he was sojourning; to follow the native customs and to see Spain, Poland, or Russia with the eyes of the native.

THIN PAPER EDITION, in Fourteen Volumes. Biographical Note in Volume One. F'cap 8vo. Bound in Blue. Cloth, 3s. 6d. net; Leather, 5s. net each. Cloth Case to contain the fourteen volumes, 5s. net.

1. THE SLAVE OF THE LAMP.
2. THE SOWERS.
3. FROM ONE GENERATION TO ANOTHER.
4. WITH EDGED TOOLS.
5. THE GREY LADY.
6. FLOTSAM.
7. IN KEDAR'S TENTS.
8. RODEN'S CORNER.
9. THE ISLE OF UNREST.
10. THE VELVET GLOVE.
11. THE VULTURES.
12. BARLASCH OF THE GUARD.
13. TOMASO'S FORTUNE and OTHER STORIES.
14. THE LAST HOPE.

ARTHUR CONAN DOYLE

IN his time Sir Arthur Conan Doyle has played many parts. Earlier in life he was a practising doctor, and in the Boer War worked as a surgeon at the front. It is, however, as a writer, a story-teller, that he is best thought of and most admired. Not only through his Sherlock Holmes series and his many other short stories working out ingenious and attractive ideas—he was the first writer to publish a short story in PUNCH—but through his longer works, also, he has won for himself a lasting niche on the shelf of the favourite books.

First 18 Volumes in the THIN PAPER EDITION. F'cap 8vo. Bound in Red. Cloth, 3s. 6d. net; Leather, 5s. net each.

ADVENTURES OF SHERLOCK HOLMES.
MEMOIRS OF SHERLOCK HOLMES.
THE RETURN OF SHERLOCK HOLMES.
HIS LAST BOW. Some reminiscences of Sherlock Holmes.
THE VALLEY OF FEAR.
THE HOUND OF THE BASKERVILLES.
THE SIGN OF FOUR.
THE WHITE COMPANY.
SIR NIGEL. A prelude to 'The White Company.'
EXPLOITS OF BRIGADIER GERARD.
RODNEY STONE.
MICAH CLARKE.
THE ADVENTURES OF GERARD.
THE TRAGEDY OF THE 'KOROSKO.'
THE REFUGEES.
TALES OF THE RING AND CAMP.
TALES OF PIRATES AND BLUE WATER.
TALES OF ADVENTURE AND MEDICAL LIFE.

GEORGE BORROW

IN his 'Life' of George Borrow, the late Mr. Herbert Jenkins stated that Borrow may almost be said to have concentrated into the years 1833-1840 a lifetime's energy and resource.

During the five years he spent in Spain he had gathered much material which he eventually collected in his first book, unique of its kind, called 'The Gypsies of Spain' (1841). The life, folk-lore, customs and traditions of the gypsies had always attracted him; he had mixed with them, had worked to bring the Scriptures into their lives, and was always ready to join their circle around the camp-fire.

DEFINITIVE EDITION ON THIN PAPER, in Six Volumes. F'cap 8vo. Bound in Green. Cloth, 3s. 6d. net; Leather, 5s. net each. Cloth Case to contain the 6 volumes, 5s. net.

1. THE BIBLE IN SPAIN; or, The Journeys, Adventures and Imprisonments of an Englishman in an Attempt to Circulate the Scriptures in the Peninsula. With the Notes and Glossary of ULICK BURKE.
2. THE GYPSIES OF SPAIN: Their Manners, Customs, Religion and Language.
3. LAVENGRO: The Scholar, the Gypsy, the Priest. Containing the unaltered Text of the Original Issue; some Suppressed Episodes printed only in the Editions issued by Mr. Murray; MS. Variorum, Vocabulary, and Notes by Professor W. I. KNAPP.
4. ROMANY RYE. A Sequel to 'Lavengro.' Collated and Revised in the same manner as 'Lavengro,' by Professor W. I. KNAPP.
5. WILD WALES: Its People, Language, and Scenery.
6. ROMANO LAVO LIL. The Word Book of the Romany or English Gypsy Language. With Specimens of Gypsy Poetry, and an Account of certain Gypsyries or Places inhabited by them, and of various things relating to Gypsy Life in England.

CHARLOTTE BRONTË and her SISTERS EMILY and ANNE BRONTË

LADY RITCHIE, Thackeray's daughter, once said that no more spontaneous honour was ever offered by one woman of genius to another than when Mrs. Gaskell wrote the 'Life' of her friend Charlotte Brontë. It is one of the great biographies in the English language, and can never be superseded.

HAWORTH EDITION ON THIN PAPER, in Seven Volumes. With Introductions by Mrs. HUMPHRY WARD. F'cap 8vo. Bound in Brown. Cloth, 3s. 6d. net; Leather, 5s. net each. Cloth Case to contain the seven volumes, 5s. net.

1. JANE EYRE. By CHARLOTTE BRONTË.
2. SHIRLEY. By CHARLOTTE BRONTË.
3. VILLETTE. By CHARLOTTE BRONTË.
4. THE PROFESSOR. By CHARLOTTE BRONTË.—POEMS by CHARLOTTE, EMILY, ANNE and PATRICK BRONTË.
5. WUTHERING HEIGHTS. By EMILY BRONTË.—AGNES GREY. By ANNE BRONTË. With a Preface and Biographical Notice of both Authors by CHARLOTTE BRONTË.
6. THE TENANT OF WILDFELL HALL. By ANNE BRONTË.
7. THE LIFE OF CHARLOTTE BRONTË. By Mrs. GASKELL. Introduction and Notes by CLEMENT K. SHORTER.

POEMS: Selections from the Poetry of Charlotte, Emily, Anne and Branwell Brontë. Including some Poems hitherto unprinted. Edited by ARTHUR C. BENSON. With Portraits of the Sisters and two Facsimile MSS. F'cap 8vo. 3s. 6d. net.

MRS. GASKELL

IN eight volumes, each containing an Introduction. Several hitherto unprinted Contributions to Periodicals, two New Poems, and some unpublished fragments of stories are included.

KNUTSFORD EDITION ON THIN PAPER. F'cap 8vo. Bound in Red. Cloth, 3s. 6d. net; Leather, 5s. net each. Cloth Case to contain the eight volumes, 5s. net.

1. MARY BARTON, and other Tales.
2. CRANFORD, and other Tales.
3. RUTH, and other Tales.
4. NORTH AND SOUTH.
5. MY LADY LUDLOW, and other Tales.
6. SYLVIA'S LOVERS, etc.
7. COUSIN PHILLIS, A DARK NIGHT'S WORK, etc.
8. WIVES AND DAUGHTERS.

A. C. BENSON

IT is a truism that by endless striving to produce perfection of phrase an author comes to profound thought and writes with power as well as charm, and it is this thoughtfulness which has gained for Dr. Benson his popularity. His books continue to appeal to a wide public which finds sympathy, solace and encouragement in the essays which comprise them.

THIN PAPER EDITION. First Six Volumes. F'cap 8vo. Cloth, 3s. 6d. net; Leather, 5s. net each.

1. THE HOUSE OF QUIET.
2. THE THREAD OF GOLD.
3. THE SILENT ISLE.
4. THE UPTON LETTERS.
5. ALONG THE ROAD.
6. FROM A COLLEGE WINDOW.

ROBERT BROWNING

AT quite an early age Robert Browning (1812-1889), took a serious interest in literature, art and music, He started to write verses when he was a boy, and once said that he never could 'recollect not writing rhymes.'

INDIA PAPER EDITION in Eight Volumes. With Portrait Frontispiece to each Volume. F'cap 8vo. Bound in Blue. Cloth, 3s. 6d. net; Leather, 5s. net each. Cloth Case to contain the eight volumes, 5s. net.

1. Pauline; Sordello; Paracelsus; Strafford.
2. Pippa Passes; King Victor and King Charles, etc.
3. Dramatic Romances; Christmas Eve & Easter Day, etc.
4. In a Balcony; Dramatis Personæ, etc.
5. The Ring and the Book, etc.
6. Red Cotton Nightcap Country; The Inn Album, etc.
7. Pacchiarotto, and How he Worked in Distemper, etc.
8. Ferishtah's Fancies; Asolando; Fancies and Facts, etc.

OXFORD INDIA PAPER EDITION. Edited and Annotated by the Rt. Hon. AUGUSTINE BIRRELL and Sir FREDERIC G. KENYON, K.C.B. With Portraits. In 1 vol., 21s. net; in 2 vols., 24s. net.

ELIZABETH BARRETT BROWNING

INDIA PAPER EDITION in Three Volumes. With Portrait Frontispiece to each Volume. F'cap 8vo. Bound in Brown. Cloth, 3s. 6d. net; Leather, 5s. net each.

1. A Drama of Exile; The Seraphim, etc.
2. Poems; Sonnets; Sonnets from the Portuguese, etc.
3. Last Poems; The Greek Christian Poets, etc.

By L. ALLEN HARKER

MISS ESPERANCE & MR. WYCHERLY

'A pure delight, so genuine is the laughter it evokes, the delicate sentiment it mingles with the mirth.'—*Daily Chronicle.*
2s. net.
Illustrated Edition, drawings by Sybil Tawse. 10s. 6d. net.

MR. WYCHERLY'S WARDS

'There are very few writers who have as much to offer us in the way of distinctive charm.'—*Morning Post.* 2s. net.

THE FFOLLIOTS OF REDMARLEY

'The young people are perfectly fascinating and so real, you can't help loving them.'—*The Tatler.* 2s. net.

JAN AND HER JOB

'Of the fun and charm of small children nobody can tell a better tale.'—*Daily Telegraph.* 7s. 6d. net and 2s. net.

MONTAGU WYCHERLY

The Wycherlys have captured thousands of hearts. This is Montagu grown up. 2s. net.

THE VAGARIES OF TOD & PETER

'A collection of tender, albeit shrewdly humorous, studies of the wit and pathos of childhood.'—*Daily Express.* 7s. 6d. net.

THE BRIDGE ACROSS

'Her touch and sympathy were never more charmingly displayed.'—*Evening News.* 7s. 6d. net and 2s. net.

THE REALLY ROMANTIC AGE.

'Little Joe makes an attractive figure, and brings out the author once more at her best.'—*Graphic.* 7s. 6d. net.

CHILDREN OF THE DEAR COTSWOLDS

'Delightful character sketches. There are plenty of children laughing through these stories.'—*Gentlewoman.* 7s. 6d. net.

ALLEGRA 7s. 6d. net and 2s. net.

A ROMANCE OF THE NURSERY 7s. 6d. net and 2s. net.

MASTER AND MAID 2s. net.

CONCERNING PAUL & FIAMMETTA 2s. net.

THE BROKEN BOW 7s. 6d. net and 2s. net.

HILDA WARE 7s. 6d. net.

JOHN MURRAY, Albemarle Street, London, W. 1.